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GOLD DUST TOM: or, AMBERGRIS BEN'S DOUBLE MATCH.

BY GEORGE HENRY MORSE.



"OPEN THAT DOOR AND SHOUT AS I DIRECT YOU, VILLAIN!" CAME ANGRILY FROM TOM'S LIPS.

Gold Dust Tom;

OR,

Ambergris Ben's Double Match.

BY GEORGE HENRY MORSE,
AUTHOR OF "THE TELEGRAPH DETECTIVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"ONE thousand dollars on the ace! Ef it wins, it's double the stakes; lose, an' I drap it along with the other four thousand, an' Ambergris Ben bids you good-night!"

The speaker was a rotund, hearty-voiced man about fifty years of age, and his short, bristling beard, little watchful eyes and white, glistening teeth made up a combination of features rather a study than a striking oddity.

His hands were podgy and small, his face of almost even roundness, with a suggestion of the shrewd and cautious in his glance. Good-nature seemed a prevailing characteristic, but when any suspicious move on the part of the dealer of the cards, in the game of faro at which he was engaged, attracted Ambergris Ben's attention, he suddenly became transformed into a far different being.

"I'm on a lark, my friends," he would say softly, "but no tricks. Don't call on the old man to show his teeth."

And, suiting the action to the word as the white ivories projected over the steady lower lip, the speaker betrayed a fighting expression that was menacing.

The scene was a gambling-den in the lower end of San Francisco; the hour, midnight; the actors in the little drama, in which Ambergris Ben was the star for the time, being the dealer, a tall, bearded man by his side, and the usual attendance of hangers-on and players. There was one other member of the little coterie with whom our story has much to do, but he was practically in the background at the present time, and had been scarcely noticed by his companions. He had entered the place a few moments before Ambergris Ben's last speech, and had seated himself at the elbow of the latter, watching his playing with a steady glance from his keen, searching eyes, almost concealed by a full, bushy beard and a well-drawn sombrero.

The dealer looked a little uneasy as Ben, who had been rattling on volubly since the commencement of the game, suddenly ceased talking and looked straight at the cards falling from the box. He dealt more slowly, and then, as if asking some casual question, turned to the well-dressed man at his side:

"I say, Ellis, just order me a brandy-sour, will you? I'm feeling somewhat unsteady."

The man designated as Ellis nodded significantly, advanced to the sideboard, and gave the required order to the man in charge. Then, as if the dealer's words had conveyed a pre-arranged hint of action, he addressed himself to the player.

"That's a singular name of yours," he remarked.

Ambergris Ben looked up quickly, fixed a knowing glance on the speaker, and then resumed his attention to the cards. If it was the scheme of the dealer and his accomplice to distract the old man's attention from the game they were destined to fail, for his eyes never wandered from the dealing-box, although he carried on a quiet conversation.

"What name, stranger?" he asked.

"Ambergris Ben."

"Ain't it good enough for all purposes? It represents exactly fifty of those thousand-dollar notes, an' it's got a history too. Aha! luck for once! I've won."

The ace had turned on the winning side. Ellis scowled darkly and the dealer looked somewhat annoyed.

"Put the hull amount on the deuce," coolly remarked Ben; and resuming the broken conversation, he continued: "I'm no Border Bill, or Road-agent Hank nor Coonskin Jack. Loud names never caught me. But, a rover by land I became a rover of the sea, an' Ambergris Ben is as well known in the North Pacific as Buffalo Bill on the plains."

The bearded stranger at the old man's side sitting silent as a statue, started as the dealer shuffled the cards and described a rapid sleight-of-hand motion. But he restrained himself, and seemed to listen to the conversation between Ben and Ellis.

"Indeed," remarked the latter; "a sea-faring man, eh?"

"Yes and no. I kin hunt, fish and trap. I've killed my man in a fair duel, and tracked down many a treacherous red-skin. I'm f.t., but I kin run, an' good-natured, but I kin' fight. But, of late years mind ye, I've taken a fancy to the sea. They used to call me Pug-nosed Ben. Let 'em laugh; they don't sneer at my snort nose now, sence it made my fortune."

A token of interest was manifest among the hangers-on at the last significant declaration.

"Your nose made your fortune?" repeated Ellis, in evident surprise.

"Prezactly."

Ambergris Ben smiled all over his face as he noted the mystified crowd about him.

"I see ye're interested," he said somewhat excitedly, and gratified at the curiosity he had evoked: "wal, I'll explain the mystery in one word—Ambergris. I shipped on a whaler. No whales. Finally we found a dead one. The b'ees wouldn't tech the carcass, but my nose was true to its old teachings in a cologne factory in the East where they used ambergris as the basis of perfume. I bought that carcass an' found—"

"What?"

"Two hundred and fifty pounds of ambergris—worth forty dollars a pound; put it in a barrel and shipped it to New York, an' sold it for spot cash. Then I went hunting dead whales. I found two in the next year; a dozen sence. That's how I come to be called Ambergris Ben, an' I reckon I'm disarvin' of the name and about as cute, honest and generous as they make 'em."

"Lost!"

The dealer swept the money from the card as he turned the deuce on the losing side. Ambergris Ben made a mock grimace of disappointment and arose coolly to his feet.

Ellis had turned to leave the spot, his share in facilitating the play evidently accomplished. He paused, as the stranger who had not spoken a word addressed the old man.

"You may be cute enough to find ambergris," he said quietly, but half-sarcastically, "but you are not cute enough to know when the land-sharks are fleecing you, Mr. Ambergris Ben."

Ellis turned, quick as a flash, sprung forward and wheeled the stranger face to face, with an oath.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, his hand seeking his pocket.

The stranger never flinched. His eyes fixed steadily on the face of the gambler, outlaw and thief, he said, in an aggressive tone of voice:

"I mean exactly what I say, Horace Ellis—gambler, adventurer and renegade; you've robbed this stranger of five thousand dollars by crooked dealing, and I'm not the man to stand by and see it done."

"You don't mean that, stranger? Robbed me?"

Ambergris Ben's face had grown dark with suspicion, doubt and uncertainty.

"I mean every word of it."

"You lie!" hissed Ellis.

"And you lie—there!"

The stranger raised his fist—with a thud it crashed into the face of the gambler who fell backward as if struck by a cannon ball.

Half a dozen men joined the dealer as the latter arose excitedly from his seat. Threats, oaths, echoed on the air. A knife flashed into view dangerously near the stranger. He sent it whirling from the owner's hand with a deft blow.

"One word," he cried, as he whipped out a revolver and held it tightly by his side. "This man has been robbed of five thousand dollars. If that money is not paid back to him before another minute there'll be the liveliest fight in this room you ever saw."

"Who is he? Down him! Some cursed detective," mingled with the shuffling of the feet of the huddled throng.

"No," broke fiercely from the stranger's lips. "You all know me, and you all hate me, but you are cowards, blacklegs, thieves, every one of you, and you are afraid of me. The money, I say, or I'll make it warm for you!"

He had thrown up the brim of his sombrero. Every man fell back, awed to silence. Only a gasping murmur from the dealer announced the truth of the stranger's words.

"Gold Dust Tom!"

"That's my name, and you know my reputation for fighting and the truth. The money? One! Two!— You are wise. Take your cash and get out of this, old man!"

The dealer with a crestfallen, rage-crossed face, had handed five bills to Ben, who thrust

them into his pocket. His face had grown lurid. His little bead-like eyes darted out a violent flame. His hands worked to and fro with a nervous restlessness that caused the dealer to become wildly alarmed.

Then, with a sudden growl, Ambergris Ben sprung forward. His fingers grasped the throat of the dealer. Raising him from the floor, he flung him bodily against the men standing back of the table.

"Take that, ye sneaking cur!" he cried. "As ef the cbances of yer thieving game wasn't enough ag'in' me, that ye'd try to make an hour's play at cards a crime. Come on, ye thieves an' blacklegs! I'll handle the last one of ye at fists."

He was a monument of rage and courage. In his excitement he began to roll up his sleeves, shaking his fists at the gambler's associates until the stranger drew him back.

"Get out of this!" commanded the latter. "We've done with them for this time."

"I'm sharpening my teeth. I'm sp'iling for a fight."

Ben's speech was suddenly checked. Gold Dust Tom had forcibly pushed him back toward a door, just in time to evade a bullet sent whizzing from a revolver of some one in the rear portion of the room.

Slowly retreating, his eyes blazed a deadly menace until he reached the door, which he sent crashing open with a backward blow of his fist.

"You'll pay for this."

Ellis spoke the words. He had arisen to his feet, his blanched face scowling a baffled hate at the retreating men.

"Not this time, Horace Ellis, and never in fair fight. I'm going to leave the place with this man. If one of your sneaking curs so much as winks after us, I'll come back and cle'n out the ranch in a way that will surprise you."

He turned coolly, as if a dozen murderous shots were not in reserve for him. Following Ambergris Ben down the stairs, he reached the street, took his arm, and led him from the spot.

Tom spoke not a word as the old man raved, threatening in an insane rage to return and fight it out.

He forced him silently along until a large straggling structure was reached. Then he spoke.

"Mr. Ambergris Ben," he said quietly. "this is your hotel. Go in and go to bed. You've had enough of city life for one evening."

The old man turned a surprised face on him after surveying the building before them.

"How did you know this was my hotel?" he demanded.

"Never mind, for the present. I know more than you think, as I will inform you when I see you again. You are getting old enough to know better than to throw your money away as you do."

Ben resented this reproach half-angrily.

"It's my own money, I reckon."

A stern look came into Gold Dust Tom's face.

"Yes," he replied impressively, "it's your own money, but you have a charge in this hotel too precious to risk by exposing yourself to peril, perhaps death among desperate villains."

A quick cry of alarm sprung to the old man's lips. He tried to detain the speaker. The latter with a wave of his hand turned and walked rapidly down the street. Ambergris Ben, with a mystified face, disappeared within the doorway of the hotel.

"Who is he?" he muttered. "He knows my secrets. He's right. Gold Dust Tom? I've heard the name afore an' as that of a brave man, a terror to villains. He'll see me ag'in. He was right, he was right; I am a fool to risk my life, when I have a sacred trust to a friend to perform."

If he had remained at the door a minute longer, he would have seen two stealthy forms glide from a shadowed doorway and follow directly in the steps of Gold Dust Tom. But, he would have feared vainly for the safety of his newly-found friend, for, as the latter cast a quick glance behind him, he murmured:

"Horace Ellis is as good as his word. He's started a pair of his emissaries on my trail. I'll give them a lesson they won't forget."

The two men had reached his side as he was passing a dark cellar-way. One sprung suddenly forward and directed a quick blow at the young man, with a slung-shot.

The latter wheeled. One movement of his foot sent his assailant reeling to the sidewalk. Then, with a spring, he caught the throat of the second ruffian.

He had both down on the pavement. With a powerful twist he clutched the throats of both,

knocking their heads together with a resonant crack.

"You miserable whelps!" he cried; "I'll give you a headache that Horace Ellis's brandy won't cure for a month."

The vindictiveness of rage was mingled with the consciousness of superior strength. The men were growing purple in the face. They struggled like mice in the grasp of a cat.

"Murder!"

Gold Dust Tom relaxed his hold, springing to his feet. The word borne upon the air rung out in clear accents.

"Murder!"

It was repeated fainter but more intense than before. He paid no further attention to his prostrate foes, but started on a keen run toward the hotel.

A pistol-shot, two, three of them followed in rapid succession, startling the echoes of the silent night.

"A cry for help!" Gold Dust Tom murmured anxiously as he dashed toward the hotel, "and the voice was that of Ambergris Ben."

CHAPTER II.

VILLAINS AT WORK.

A FINER specimen of perfect humanity never trod the streets of the Golden City than the man who had just disposed of two murderous ruffians, and was bent on a new venture of peril, without so much as a tremor of excitement or fear.

When Ambergris Ben had repeated the name of Gold Dust Tom, with a dim recollection of hearing it before, connected with deeds of daring, he had echoed a memory which time had but partly effaced. For ten years Gold Dust Tom had been a character of the Pacific slope, a miner, a stage-driver and a scout by turns, and in each avocation the young man had acquitted himself in a remarkable manner. No delver for ore ever drove the pick or handled the shovel with deeper energy than himself. No bandit ever guided his mettled steed over the mountain roads with surer poise, and, in trailing the dusky denizen of the woods, he had exhibited a skill and caution that had made him a terror to the warrior tribes of the inland. Possessed of a clear, kindly eye, a calm, generous nature, and a noble face, he had ever been the champion of the poor and weak, and had uprooted the bully and braggart on many occasions.

In the present case, from his mysterious appearance at the gambling-den to his strange revelation to Ambergris Ben, a deep motive aside from natural chivalry had inspired him. A mighty secret was locked within his breast, which was destined to be brought to light sooner than he had anticipated, by the fast-occurring incidents of the night.

"Murder!"

The cry had already reached other ears than his own, and the echo of the word had accelerated his run toward the hotel. He dashed through the doorway like a flash, toppling over a terrified servant; and, by intuition or from some previous knowledge of the place, he found himself at the very door of the apartment occupied by Ambergris Ben.

A glance indicated to Tom that his recognition of the voice of the old man was not a mistake. A lamp burned in a bracket, and its rays showed a scene of excitement and confusion. Upon the floor, bleeding from a slight wound in the head, was Ambergris Ben slowly struggling to his feet. Near him was a trunk, its contents scattered over the floor, while the lower part of the window leading to the side yard of the hotel, had been torn from its place, the splintered glass covering the sill and the floor.

"What has happened? quick! man; you were assaulted? Which way have they gone?"

Old Ben with a glance of recognition at Gold Dust Tom pointed to the window.

"Two of them," he gasped out. "One the man Ellis, I could swear to it. My money! a slung shot."

His last words did not reach the young man's ears. He had sprung to the window nimbly. When he returned, five minutes later, a score of men filled the room listening to Ben's story of the robbery. A shade of dismay and concern came into Tom's face.

"There is no trace of the villains," he said calmly. "Gentlemen, please leave the room. I wish to question my friend about this affair."

The throng dispersed at his words. Gold Dust Tom closed the door, and turned to Ben with an anxious look. The latter had been lifted to a chair, and the blood washed from his wound.

"Are you seriously hurt?" inquired Tom.

"No, only a stunning blow. But, the money!"

They tore it from me before I could resist or shoot, although I fired through the window at them. My heavens, man! am I crazy? Juanita! This commotion will alarm her terribly. I forgot all about her."

At the mention of the name Juanita, Gold Dust Tom started. The first trace of excited emotion he had yet shown, crossed his brown, handsome face. He paled slightly, his eyes became anxious and he seemed about to speak. But he repressed the impulse, still betraying, however, a deep concern. A woman's name had stirred his being more powerfully than the menace of death itself.

Ben arose to his feet and advanced to a door connecting with an adjoining room. He opened it, and repeated the name he had before spoken: "Juanita!"

There was no response. He peered into the dark apartment and called the name again. Still silence was his only answer and he grew wildly alarmed.

"Quick! if anything should have happened to her! But no, no!—she is asleep. The lamp," he said, hurriedly.

Almost as much excited as his companion, Gold Dust Tom took down the lamp from its bracket and hastened to the next room. Its rays illuminated the interior, showing an apartment so disordered that Ben uttered a frantic cry.

"Gone!" he ejaculated. "See! yonder window also is open, her cloak and hat are on the floor. It is as I feared; oh! fool that I was to give way to a spirit of gaming, when I should have guarded her with my life."

Exhaustion and excitement made him totter like a child. Gold Dust Tom did not speak. His face showed the most poignant emotion, and then, suddenly, a new light came into his eyes.

"Ay, gone!" he cried. "Abducted by the same hand that stole your money. It is all some part of a deep plot of that villain, Ellis. There is no time to lose; he shall be traced and punished. Oh! I will not spare him this time."

"The trunk! the papers!" gasped Ben, abruptly, as he hurried to the other room. "The villains, again! Gone, girl and documents, both. I am ruined, lost!"

He had examined the scattered contents of the trunk with feverish haste. He fell back, as if struck a sudden blow, as he came to a large envelope heavily sealed. Its inclosure, evidently the prized document to which he referred, seemed to have been taken away by the thieves.

A deep shadow crossed the young man's face. He seemed lost in a puzzling reverie. His companion, utterly overcome, sat staring blankly at the scattered papers before him. He appeared to slowly realize it all. His money had been wrested from him; a young girl—his charge, abducted; a valuable paper stolen.

"You said a plot," he breathed, finally. "Who could get up a plot to do all this unless they knew—"

"All your secrets," interrupted Tom. "They did. Are you blind, Ambergris Ben, to think your money only was what they sought—that they would carry away a young girl in the heart of San Francisco because she had a pretty face? No; a deep game of fraud and crime has begun. It commenced when you, an hour since, unwittingly walked into Horace Ellis's gambling-den and placed yourself under the power of your deadliest foe and that of Juanita."

Ambergris Ben sat transfixed at the words of his companion. Slowly he appeared to comprehend their meaning. He listened like one turned to stone as Gold Dust Tom went on:

"There is no use of my deceiving you. I know you, I know Juanita, I know your secret. Five years since your old friend, Arnold Leslie, died, leaving his daughter to your care. He feared enemies, he feared for his child, for his wife was the daughter of Ayal Trujillo, the last living descendant of the royal line of Montezumas. You knew what that meant. The mystic secret of his life centered about the child, Juanita, for she was the heiress to vast wealth. When she was eighteen years of age you were directed to come to San Francisco to apply to Marston, the banker, to receive a certain paper explaining your future course in regard to her. You did so. That paper contained the secret of her life; scarcely an hour in your possession, it has fallen into the hands of a merciless enemy, and you and herself are in ignorance of its precious contents."

A deep groan broke from old Ben's lips.

"Pile it onto me! Curse me, boy! I deserve it all for my recklessness."

"No," returned Tom, "for you have been a

faithful guardian to Juanita. When three years since, you found her hunted down by an old enemy of her father, Bryce Williard, you escaped from him and placed her at school at Matamoras. She was safe there; you went to see her, returning a month since, and you brought her here to get the papers."

"How do you know all this?"

"Because I am the affianced husband of your ward."

"You?"

The old man shouted the word incredulously.

"Yes; I met her; I loved her. When you returned we determined to keep it a secret for a time at least. When I followed you to-night to Horace Ellis's gambling-den, it was by Juanita's earnest desire."

The accumulating surprises of the evening seemed to overcome the old man. He did not speak.

"You were followed, traced. The enemy you once feared is again on your trail. That paper stolen to-night undoubtedly tells of treasure, or a great fortune held by some fanatic devotee of the Aztecs. You know the story of the mysterious heritage of Caldeiras, the mountain hermit—that he holds uncounted wealth, saved from the pillage when Montezumas died, to be given to some lineal descendant of the old kingly race, who will restore the glories of the Aztec empire. What if Juanita's claim was something like this? Ambergris Ben, arouse yourself! The game has begun, the trail is fresh, Bryce Williard must be followed!"

"Bryce Williard?"

"Ay! for he is the man who has wrought all this trouble to-night. Bryce Williard and Horace Ellis are one."

"Ye don't mean it?"

Old Ben's vernacular was inadequate to express his amazement, but a moment later his rage broke forth unrestrainedly.

"I see it all, stranger!" he cried. "The plot, the villain, the game—I see yer interest in this affair. I jine bands with ye. A nobler man I never met, fer ye show yer mettle in yer face an' deeds. We'll hunt this man down; we'll save the gal an' punish him, or my name ain't Ambergris Ben."

He gathered up the papers and placed them in the trunk. For over an hour he was busy arranging things to his satisfaction.

Then the two men scoured the city and its vicinity all through the night for some trace of Juanita's abductor. Tireless as sleuth hounds on a scent, cautious and shrewd as expert detectives, they haunted the lowest and most public places of the city.

Not a trace of the girl or her abductor could be found. Juanita had disappeared; but in the early morning, just as they were despatching of tracing the gambler, a discovery was made that set them both at fever-heat.

A clew had been found, not to the villain Bryce Williard, or to his prisoner, but to a companion of the former, with whom they believed he would communicate within the next few hours.

They ascertained that Bryce Williard, aside from his gambling schemes and the abduction of Juanita, had formed a confederation of crime in the Golden City which he would influence to aid his designs, and that this band of desperadoes was no less a formidable association than the notorious opium-smugglers of the coast.

CHAPTER III.

AT THE COAST TAVERN.

"I've served my time, an' I owe the State a grudge. Howlin' Sahara, but I'm spilin' for a fight!"

"Easy, stranger. This is a public house, and I'm a peaceable man. Don't!"

The last word was a frightened appeal on the part of the landlord of the Coast Tavern, and he paled and trembled as he spoke.

For the first speaker—the man he had addressed—had drawn a knife from its sheath and sent it hilt deep through the thin board partition behind the bar, with an echoing war-whoop.

"Ye ain't used to catamarans, are ye? That's me, Catamaran Bill. Well, I'm full of good whisky and in fer a lark. Set the liquor out ag'in—the best, mind ye, or I'll make the bottles dance to the tune of a pistol-shot."

The scene was a common one. A rough, insolent bully had entered the Coast Tavern half an hour before the opening of this chapter, and since then had kept its frightened host on the *qui vive* of terror and excitement with his reckless threats and actions. To the latter,

he was some desperado or convict bent on mischief, each moment inspired to renewed deviltry by fresh libations of liquor. To a careful observer, however, the shrewd glitter in his eye indicated a deeper motive in his maneuvers than that of the braggart.

Evidently his performance was not intended for the landlord, for that individual was already under the influence of fear. The attention of the ruffian was divided between the two other occupants of the place, and his purpose seemed to be to frighten or drive them away from the saloon.

Something, however, in the manner and appearance of the youngest of these two prevented his acting on the open aggressive toward them. Twice he had staggered past the youngest of the twain, who was seated in a chair smoking a cigar placidly, indifferent to the drunken antics of the bully. To all appearances he was a Spaniard, his dress and hair be tokening a peninsular ranchero, or petty official. But, although inferior in size to the man who had announced himself as Catamaran Bill, the steady glance of his eye from beneath the drawn sombrero showed a defiance and contempt for the bully that cowed him.

The other occupant of the place was a man of full habit, with a face shaven perfectly smooth and brown as that of a Malay. He wore a pair of dark spectacles, useless at present, however, for his eyes were closed, and his attitude was one of drunken slumber. Toward him Catamaran Bill directed his attention at last.

"Git up, hyar!" he ordered, as he gave the sleeper a vicious dig in the ribs. "It's time for old men to be at hum and asleep."

The speaker gave utterance to a grunt, and sunk lower and more helpless in his chair. His evident inebriation seemed to make him unworthy of further attention from the bully, for the latter returned to the bar, drained a glass of liquor, and then strolled to the open door of the tavern.

The silent smoker changed his position as the bully's back was turned, and tilted his chair against the wall. The movement brought him nearer to the sleeping man—so near, in fact, that he almost touched him. A single sentence, murmured cautiously, swept his lips as he lit a fresh cigar. It was addressed to the inebriate:

"Admirable, Ben! You're a star actor."

The pretended inebriate smiled. Then he resumed his drunken pose, only a gleam in the corner of his drooping eyelids telling that he was watching the man at the door.

Silence fell over the scene, and the landlord glanced at Catamaran Bill with a sigh of relief as the former moved toward the door.

The bully evidently had no intention of leaving just then, however, for he lolled against the door-post, his eyes fixed on the black expanse of water—a little bay lying beyond the road in front of the hotel.

Suddenly he started, and strained his vision to pierce the gloom-laden air of the night. The silent smoker leaned forward eagerly, and glancing past the figure blocking the doorway, saw the cause of Catamaran Bill's excitement.

Flashed once, twice, across the bay, a mere speck in the distance, was a light. So unmistakably was it the cause of Catamaran Bill's interest, so engrossed was the stranger in observing it, that the former turned quick enough to detect the other staring fixedly at the now stationary light.

An angry oath issued from Catamaran Bill's lips. For the first time he ventured to approach the stranger.

"What are ye spying at?" he ground out. "It 'pears to me ye're uncommon curious about affairs in here."

Not a word was ventured in response. The calm eyes were fixed on the face of the bully, but their owner continued smoking carelessly, his lips opening only to puff the curling smoke directly in the face of the snarling braggart who confronted him.

"Mebbe you think it's a signal? Mebbe ye're some cussed revenue, pokin' your nose in other people's affairs?"

"I do think it's a signal. What of it?"

"Pipin' geysers! ef I thought a man couldn't meet a friend at a quiet hotel without bein' spotted by some pesky copper, I'd cl'ar the ranch. An' mebbe, stranger, ye think this a signal, too."

He had sprung to the wall and seized a lamp. Raising it, he waved it twice before the open window, replaced it, and glared menacingly at the smoker.

"I know it is."

"Ye impudent Greaser! I'll settle yer case once for all. Take that!"

Catamaran Bill had thrown himself forward with a lunge of his big, sprawling arms. Their sweep met nothing. As spry as an athlete the smoker dodged aside, gained his feet with a dexterous movement, and directed a single blow of his powerful fist at the forehead of his burly antagonist.

With a thud the desperado sunk to the floor, and then with an oath he struggled to his feet again.

"Whar is he? I'll hev his lif! I'll crush him ter dust, I sw'ar I will! Whar hez he gone?"

He stared around him with utter amazement. As if swallowed up by the earth, his antagonist had disappeared.

Raving, threatening, cursing, the burly desperado scoured the room and its vicinity, reconnoitering the outside and gazing under tables, the bar, and into adjoining apartments. It was useless. His assailant was nowhere to be found, and the landlord shook his head when questioned as to his flight.

Still raving wildly, Catamaran Bill came to a dead stop as a form appeared in the doorway enveloped in a long cloak. Stepping quietly into the room, the new-comer concealed his face as he glanced sharply about the place, and glided to the side of the bully.

"Quick!" he spoke in a hoarse whisper, "I got the signal. Is the room ready? Are you mad to raise a row at a time like this? Are there any suspicious characters around?"

The bully's manner changed to abject servility.

"It's all right, captain. I've engaged the room. We'll be safe hyar."

He led the way to a door, and they both disappeared from view.

The landlord muttered disconsolately to himself, deeply annoyed at the suspicious and troublesome guests of the evening. He failed to observe the sleeping stranger leave his seat and glide stealthily through the open front door.

There was no trace of inebriation in this man now. His voice was clear, his eyes gleamed like two coals of fire as he gained the outer air.

"Catamaran Bill and his captain, Bryce Williard!" he muttered between his teeth. "Gold Dust Tom gave the bully a blow that will be followed by a wuss one afore the night is through ef we don't collar his boss and find the gal. Whar hez the lad gone to; to watch 'em? Then I'll take up my position under yonder tree. Bryce Williard, ye're in a trap, with two determined men on yer trail, an' yer don't leave hyar to-night till yer give me back my money, the gal an' the paper ye stole, or my name ain't Ambergris Ben!"

CHAPTER IV.

A NIGHT OF ADVENTURES.

ALL the elements of a deep plot were present in the little roadside tavern at which Ambergris Ben, disguised, had appeared on the trail of the man he hated most of all human beings.

The old whale-hunter had been induced by Gold Dust Tom to act contrary to the hot impulses of his reckless nature. He had been convinced that precipitate haste, while it might bring Bryce Williard to grief, would not be likely to cover all the long trail of guilt and fraud the villain and his confederates had made. They must meet caution with caution, shrewdness with a matchless deftness; and the result of a confab after discovering a clew to the haunts of Williard's associates, was to disguise themselves successfully, and repair to the spot where they believed Williard would soon appear.

The result has been shown. It was Gold Dust Tom who laid the burly Catamaran Bill prostrate on the floor of the bar-room, but his flight had not been one of cowardice. He had simply taken advantage of the downfall of his foe to escape to an absence which, later on, would enable them to entrap their foes. It would be folly at the present state of the game to meet in open conflict.

And while old Ben grimly watched the building contain'ing his foe from the shadow of a tree, Gold Dust Tom had penetrated to the upper portion of the structure through a convenient doorway and was now traversing the gloomy attic endeavoring to locate the position of the new-comer and his confederate.

Catamaran Bill was silent as he led the way to a room back of the bar. As the door closed, his guest threw aside his cloak and flung it into a chair.

"Sit down," he said. "You say we are safe here?"

"As safe as if on the coast at Glorieta."

"No names, Bill. You had a row just now."

"Curse the meddling stranger! yes. I tried to get the coast clear for you. But ye needn't fear, he's run off. He was the only one I thought looked as if he might be on the watch."

"Have you looked out for the old man and that infernal Gold Dust Tom?"

"Yes, but I can't find 'em. They've mysteriously disappeared. Safe enough y'u are now, if they get the whole police force after ye."

Bryce Williard looked uneasily about the apartment.

"Not if I have to come this near the town very often. But to business. You know the new lay?"

"Opium."

"Exactly. The coast has been watched for a month past, and two packages dropped by the steamer were gobbled by the revenues. But we're bulking a fortune on a big run. It came in to-night."

Catamaran Bill started.

"Inter the city?"

"Exactly."

"You amaze me, captain."

Williard smiled complacently.

"It was a clever dodge. All you've got to do is to hire a horse and wagon, and bring the stuff down to the ranch."

"The opium?—ye don't mean—?"

"That it has passed inspection and will be delivered to you all right! Ha! what was that?"

A little dust had fallen on the table between them. Williard looked up quickly.

"Some rat in the ceiling," reassuringly replied Bill. "Go on with yer orders, captain."

"The package is at the Government warehouse. Here is the receipt," and Williard took a piece of paper from his pocket. "Package No. 2824. That ends any necessity of being in town again very soon."

"And the gal?"

Williard's eyes sparkled.

"A clear million when the game is ripe," he replied. "You won't repent fair service to me this time, I'll warrant you."

He had arisen to his feet, as if, his business accomplished, he was bent on leaving the place.

At that moment there was a crash. The startled men sprung aside as a cloud of dust, mortar and broken lathes covered the table, followed by a heavy body.

It was Gold Dust Tom. In his curiosity to overhear them, he had bored a small hole through the plastering. In peering through, his balance became overburdened and the frail partition gave way.

Both men had drawn their knives. Catamaran Bill sprung forward as he discerned the intruder.

"It's my man, he that floored me!" he cried.

"It's Gold Dust Tom!" ejaculated the excited Williard. "Finish him, or we're lost! He's overheard all. Not that!"

Bill had drawn a revolver, and sprung toward the prostrate body of Gold Dust Tom. As he spoke, Williard raised his revolver and dealt Tom a heavy blow with its end. The young man fell back apparently insensible.

"Finished!" ejaculated Williard. "He's off our trail at last."

"No, only stupefied. Quick, the door! Some one is coming!" and Bill ran to the door and locked it.

Williard hastened to the window as he spoke.

"The very thing!" he muttered, as he returned and seized Tom. "When I whistle, follow me."

He dragged the body through the window. His signal rung out a minute later.

"What be you goin' to do?" inquired Bill, as he gained his side.

"Lift the body."

"Ye ain't goin' to carry it off!"

"No."

"What then?"

"The well. See, it's ten feet away. Quick! I see a form coming toward us."

Together they lifted the inanimate Tom and hurried toward the open well. A cry of alarm from Williard's lips was mingled with the report of a revolver as the body slipped from their grasp and disappeared with an echoing plunge into the well!

They did not delay, to face their new foe. A man had darted toward them, firing twice after them, and then, with a wild ejaculation of horror he sprung to the well-curb and gazed down into the darkness.

"Tom! Tom! are you there?—alive or dead?" shouted Ambergris Ben excitedly—for he it was.

A faint murmur reached his ears. It grew to an ejaculation, a minute later, for the means

employed to kill Williard's foe, had resulted in his restoration to consciousness.

Contact with the water had revived Tom.

"The rope!" he called back, as he heard Ben's voice.

With prodigious strength Ben began turning the windlass, and he dragged the form of Tom over the curb a minute later.

"Are ye hurt?" he asked solicitously.

"Not seriously, but badly shaken up."

"Then I'm off, fer ye can't j'ine me, weak as ye are. Williard hez given me the slip, but I'll trace him down this night if I search the ocean for him."

Leaving his half-drowned companion, lying on the ground exhausted, Ambergis Ben dashed off in the gloom of the night.

CHAPTER V.

THE SMUGGLED OPIUM.

GOLD DUST TOM lay perfectly still as he saw Ambergis Ben disappear in pursuit of his enemies. The landlord, attracted by the commotion, had come hurriedly to the outside of the tavern. Then, fearing some new incursion of the desperadoes, he hastily closed and barred the doors and windows, and the place became enveloped in darkness.

Twice Tom essayed to arise, but found his strength failed him, and for half an hour he was compelled to remain where he was. Restored vitality came at last. He struggled to his feet, glanced searchingly over the deserted landscape, and then with an anxious solicitude for the brave and rash Ben, turned thoughtfully toward the distant lights of the city.

His first move was to repair to a hotel and secure dry garments; his next to seek a few hours' rest. He was utterly in the dark as to the coast haunt of Williard's men, and as mystified regarding the result of the probable pursuit of Ben. His mind acknowledged a leading motive in his plans—the rescue of Juanita, but the discovery of the evening made him realize that its developments were of an importance to the Government not to be undervalued. Daylight found him still awake and thoughtful; sunrise discovered him making his way to the residence of a well-known Government official, and he routed the officer from his bed, unceremoniously.

"You are Colonel Clowry, Chief of the Pacific coast Revenue Service?" he asked the officer, as the latter entered the room where Tom was seated, with evidences of a hasty toilet.

His host bowed affirmatively, but with some little annoyance in his manner. Evidently, he disliked having his morning nap disturbed, but the message Tom had sent was imperative.

"I have called on a matter which, incidentally discovered by myself last night, will, I am certain, startle you."

"In reference to—"

"The opium-smugglers."

The officer's eyes brightened.

"It is current gossip," went on Tom, "that within the past ten years the opium smuggled into the city has defrauded the Government of over six millions of dollars, and that so deftly and successfully do these smugglers cover their tracks as to utterly defeat the efforts of your officers to bring them to justice. Am I correct?"

"I regret to state that you are."

"While several seizures have been made, the mysterious operations of some well-organized confederation engaged in this illicit trade have been kept from official and public view. Accident has revealed the identity of the league to myself. Self-interest, combined with duty, brings me to you to announce my discovery. I know the chief of this band. I even know where a large consignment of opium is now lying in a package, passed by the custom-house as non-dutiable."

"You amaze me!"

"I have learned that a certain package numbered 2824, now in the Government warehouse, and landed yesterday from a China steamer, has, in some mysterious manner, passed official inspection. This package, I am positive, contains opium."

"It seems incredible! The revenue officers have been unusually vigilant and careful late."

"A visit to the warehouse—"

"I was about to suggest the same thing. Your information is of a character most important, if it turns out to be true. Will you excuse me for a few moments? I will join you soon."

When Colonel Clowry reappeared, he led the way from the house and down the street toward the wharf. The massive edifice used as a Gov-

ernment warehouse was soon reached. Its closely-shuttered windows and iron-barred doors made it resemble a tenantless structure, but in reply to hard knocking, a man appeared at the door.

He was the custodian of the place, and as he recognized the chief of the secret service, he admitted him and his companion.

A search was at once instituted for the package referred to by Gold Dust Tom. Among a heterogeneous mass of boxes, casks and packages, a large oblong chest was at last drawn forth. It bore the number of 2824, and was so heavy that Tom and the colonel were compelled to aid the custodian in dragging it out.

"Arrived yesterday on the China steamer," murmured the officer, somewhat excitedly, "and the number corresponds. So far you are correct. Singular, though, it is branded as examined and passed upon, and has evidently been opened and investigated. My man, are the memorandum-books available?"

"Yes, sir; they are in the bookcase. I will get the book in which we note down the first inspection."

"Do so."

The man disappeared and returned shortly with a book over the pages of which the colonel looked rapidly.

"Here we are," he said. "Consignment, one box containing embalmed body of Jacques Roquet, died at Hong Kong, and shipped to William Ball, Sacramento City. There must be some mistake."

"Will you open the box and see?"

The colonel hesitated. Evidently he was inclined to believe Gold Dust Tom the victim of a mistake, but, after a few minutes' thought, he said:

"Yes, to satisfy you, I will. The hammer and chisel."

The man produced the tools. The box was made of rough, close-fitting boards. It was an easy task prying it open. The colonel looked eagerly into the box.

It contained a metallic casket. To all appearance the contents of the same was an embalmed body, for in the upper portion was a glass, and beneath it, plainly visible, the face of a man.

The closed eyes, the white features, the dark hair could be seen. The glass seemed slightly dimmed, but the colonel's face showed that he was satisfied that Tom had fallen into an error.

"You see it is a body," he said. "It is a common thing to ship foreigners here, even as we send the Chinamen home when they die. You have been purposely or innocently deceived, sir. That package is straight."

"I don't believe it!"

Gold Dust Tom spoke in a firm, earnest tone.

"May I ask why?"

"Because that glass," and Tom touched it, "is obscured as if purposely on the inner surface. If I had the official right, I would do what the officers evidently have not done."

"And that is?"

"To open the casket."

The colonel frowned. He apparently believed he was right. With another ejaculation, he said finally:

"Very well," and he proceeded to unscrew the top of the casket.

A cry of utter amazement rent his lips as he removed the top. The glass taken off, the features of the occupant of the casket were more plainly visible. Flesh and blood never looked thus. A single word told of a deit fraud as Colonel Clowry gasped out:

"Wax!"

"Exactly, a dummy!" cried Tom triumphantly. "See!" and lifting the wax face he showed that it was indeed so.

In a moment the lower portion of the casket was unscrewed. A dull taint began to fill the air. They found a dozen packages neatly arranged in the casket, which filled the space not taken up by the wax head.

Colonel Clowry was amazed. His face betrayed the most intense astonishment. He scarcely heard Gold Dust Tom as the latter said:

"A man will call for this package in the morning."

"Then we will arrest him."

"No, Colonel Clowry. I have brought you valuable information. I have a deep motive in tracing the box, but should detectives be set on its trail they will be eluded. I am no revenue detective, but I have a motive in following the man to whom this box will be eventually delivered—a motive sufficiently strong to enable me to act also in good faith with you in hunting him down."

"What are you driving at?"

"Simply this:—I have a plan for tracing the smugglers to their haunt. Remove the coffin and the opium, bore half a dozen breathing holes in the box and deliver it to the man who calls for it."

"Empty?"

"No."

"What do you mean, then?"

"That you allow me to take the place of the casket—that you place me in the box, and deliver me to this emissary of the Opium Smugglers of the Coast!"

CHAPTER VI.

AMBERGIS BEN ON THE TRAIL.

"We've settled him, but there's another one after us," muttered Bryce Williard as he dashed away from the Coast Tavern followed by Catamaran Bill. "Don't delay, I can't afford to get into trouble just now."

"Which way, captain?"

"Down the shore, and keep near the bay. I've a horse over near the road."

The two men skirted the water's edge at a running gait, but lessened their speed as a backward glance revealed no pursuers in sight. As they reached the side of the little indentation of land opposite the tavern, Bryce Williard proceeded to a clump of trees and came out on the beach a minute later with a bridled horse.

"He's tired from the run from the old den," he said, "but he'll carry me back as far as the boat. Remember, Bill, use caution with the box and don't let any one follow you."

"Trust me for that, captain," and as they parted, Catamaran Bill made his way across the sand-hills in the direction of the distant city, while Williard mounted his horse and started southward down the beach.

All fear of pursuit seemed to have left the mind of the latter. He believed he had effectively disposed of Gold Dust Tom, and he adjudged the second mysterious arrival at the tavern to be some passing pedestrian or officer who would not be likely to discover Tom's flight. His head dropped thoughtfully on his breast as he pursued his way, and, unconscious of any lurking peril, he allowed the steed to jog along at a lazy canter.

A dozen rods behind him, on the beach, a man's form had dogged his course ever since he had parted with Catamaran Bill. The threat of Ambergis Ben that he would not lose sight of his foe was not an idle one, and, running at times, then walking, he kept his enemy in view.

Thus, for nearly ten miles, and far up the beach, pursuer and pursued continued their way. It was only when the latter halted at a little old building, that Ben secreted himself in the timber and watched his man cautiously.

He heard Williard give utterance to a shrill, peculiar whistle. A minute later a man came out from the house and took the reins from his hands. Then the latter, with a few low-spoken words to the man, darted down the road as if bent on continuing his journey on foot.

Ambergis Ben, close on his trail, was somewhat puzzled as Williard reached a stream with a swift current, and from among some bushes drew out a skiff and boarded it.

"He means to cross the river," Ben decided. "There's no use to trifle longer. It's a bold move, but if he diskivers me, it's fight, that's all."

Just as the boat left the water's edge, to the undisguised amazement of its occupant, Ambergis Ben appeared in view, and, springing into its stern, coolly uttered the single word:

"Howdy?"

Bryce Williard stayed the oars and stared fixedly at the intruder.

"What does this mean?" he demanded, in a suspicious tone. "Who are you? Get out of this boat!"

"Not much. Stranger, I've bin chased for twenty minutes or more by some friends as don't over-like me, an' ye've got to give me a lift down the river."

To Ben's surprise, Williard did not resent his proposition. Instead he said, in a light, careless tone:

"Oh, some refugee from the police or the revenues? All right, my friend, I'll take you as far as I go," and forthwith he began to propel the craft toward mid-stream.

As Williard did so, he looked suspiciously toward Ben, but he did not break the silence which ensued. Quietly the boat proceeded down the stream, o'd Ben in the stern, and for over an hour it floated rapidly on its course.

Twice, in the distance, Ben had noticed a light gleaming which seemed to enchain the

attention of Williard, but he could make out no outline in the darkness. He had begun to flatter himself that his enemy did not recognize or even suspect him, when an incident occurred which startled him.

The current was running fast, the light in the distance had grown nearer, when suddenly Williard arose in the boat. Before Ben could rise to avert the blow, the gambler brought the oar with tremendous force down over his head, sprung into the water, swam to the shore and disappeared in the darkness.

So startled and confused was Ben that he did not realize his peril till a minute later. He observed that the boat was being rapidly whirled down the river toward some rapids. It was with difficulty that he managed to swim ashore. Wet and exhausted he lay on the bank, grim'y comprehending the unpleasant *dénouement* of his sail with the man he intended to trace to cover, and then compel to disclose the whereabouts of the abducted Juanita.

"He's given me the slip, that's sartain," muttered Old Ben, disconsolately, as he struggled to his feet. "But it's equally sartain he was near home or he wouldn't have clipped me so soon. Whar's the lights I saw? If I kin trace them, I'm mortal sure to locate this coyote."

Ben wrung out his water-soaked garments, paced the banks of the stream slowly, and scanned his surroundings. The spot was a strange one to him, but as he finally came to a rocky break in the shore and saw outlined against the sky a large rambling frame structure, he uttered a satisfied ejaculation, and drew back in the screening shadow of some bushes.

For over an hour the old man viewed the place and all its surroundings that were visible in the darkness. It seemed to be an old deserted mill, and approachable only by a narrow wagon-road on the upland. The rapids were located a few rods above the mill, and it was impossible to gain access to the place from Ben's present spot of espionage.

"Thar's lights thar, an' men. Suthin' is goin' on, an' Bryce Williard's in the swim," soliloquized the veteran. "Well and good. I believe he's housed yonder, probably with friends, and I'll be cautious how I move! I'll think the thing over."

Ben solaced his disturbed mood with a quiet smoke for over an hour. At daylight he awoke from an involuntary slumber, and pursued his investigations.

He learned considerable concerning the old mill during the morning. To all appearances, in broad daylight, the place was deserted. He did not see a trace of occupancy during the entire morning's scout in the vicinity; but, about noon, he ran across some casual discoveries that interested him.

In his wanderings in the neighborhood he found, about a mile from the mill, a little old hut, and applying for food he was met at its door by a grizzly, uncouth specimen of humanity, who he afterward learned was a fisherman and hunter.

His application for food and payment for the same led to a brief conversation; although the old hunter was loth to talk at first.

"I don't keer to set a spy on my neighbors," the close-mouthed pioneer had said.

"Not at all, not at all," interrupted Ben glibly, "I'm only cur'us. Thar's people in the old mill yonder, an' I was sorter speculatin' on their means of livin', that's all."

"An' ye hain't no revenue?"

"Do I look it, my friend? I don't hardly know what a revenue is."

"Them doas!" remarked the old hunter with a mystifying nudge of his shoulder toward the mill.

Ben's eyes snapped eagerly. "They do, eh?" he replied. "Sort o' lay-low-in-the-day-time an' operate-at-night-people, eh? Oh, you're a sly old fox! I'll guarantee, you've got 'em down fine."

The old hunter, gratified at Ben's tribute to his shrewdness, winked slyly.

"You see it's none o' my business," he went on. "They buy game of me and pay me well, to say nothin' of a boat they bought of me for ten times its value. Atween you and I, howsoever, I sort o' imagine that the twenty odd men that come and go yonder air road-agents or smugglers."

"Ye don't say so?"

"I do, an' yonder is ther hoss and wagon makin' for the bridge over the stream, I declar'!"

They had been standing in the doorway of the hut, from whence a perfect view of the river and its surroundings was afforded. The hunter

had indicated a point in the landscape a short distance down and across the stream.

Old Ben did not wait to question his host further. A single glance had revealed to him a familiar form seated on the box of the wagon.

He did not linger to apologize for his abrupt departure. Skirting the path leading to the river, he gained the frail log bridge spanning the narrowest portion of the stream, and stood, half concealed by a tree, awaiting the arrival of the wagon, which was slowly rambling over the irregular river road.

His revolver ready for use in his pocket, a shrewd plan outlined to at last gain access to the old mill from which the bridge was just visible. Ben sprung suddenly forward as the horse's feet touched the first timber of the bridge. With a bound he reached the side of the astonished driver, and pressing the cold muzzle of the revolver directly under his nose, he said, in a quick, earnest tone:

"Stop yer team, Mr. Catamaran Bill. I've got the drop an' I intend to have a little private conversation with you."

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE LION'S LAIR.

BEN'S sudden appearance had taken Catamaran Bill completely aback. The latter involuntarily tightened the reins, and then as the horse came to a dead stop he sat stock-still, his eyes shrinking from the deadly menace of the leveled revolver only to seek the determined face of the disguised Ben.

The ruffian's first words indicated that he recognized the old man.

"What do yer want?" he demanded sharply. "You are the drunken man of the Coast Tavern."

"I wasn't any drunker then than I am now, my friend. Catamaran Bill, when your precious partner who calls himself Horace Ellis asks you ag'in abou' Ambergis Ben, tell him you've seen him, for I'm that varmint."

"You!"

It was all Bill could say. His eyes filled with speculative amazement, he sat staring blankly at Ben as if at a specter.

"Now, then, no foolin'; yer pals hev got a gal an' some of my money I intend to hev, or I shall kill them off one by one, beginnin' with you."

Bill's eyes began to grow crafty. His free hand crept suspiciously near his belt. He suddenly whisked a knife into sight.

"No ye don't. Be keerful, my friend. Don't ye rile me, if ye'r' wise."

Catamaran Bill uttered a sullen oath. As he drew the knife, Ben had struck his wrist a blow with the revolver that sent the weapon flying over the edge of the frail bridge and into the water below.

Ben's eyes wandering over the wagon rested on a heavy, oblong box. He directed a quick question to his companion, who, disarmed, sat glowering at him wrathfully.

"What's in the box?"

"You find out."

"Oh, I kin guess. Some plunder from yer maraudin' exploits, I suppose. Now, then, Mr. Bill, I jest give ye five minutes to peel off yer clothes and git ready to be gagged an' bound fer a few hours."

But for the leveled revolver it is doubtful if Bill would not have sprung boldly on his captor. As it was a defiant dare-devil expression came into his swarthy face.

"I see yer game," he hissed out, "but it won't go, even if I was fool enough to help ye. Tap your shootin'-iron. I won't do as ye bid me."

"Ye won't?"

"No."

"Be keerful," and a dangerous gleam came into Ambergis Ben's eyes.

"In yonder old ranch thar's a gal I intend to find, an' I'll do it or scalp the last one of yer infernal gang."

"Will yer?"

Catamaran Bill's words were a half-triumphant sneer. He made a quick move as he uttered them. On the square fight Ambergis Ben might have been his equal, but he was no match in the crafty arts at the desperado's command.

For Catamaran Bill had executed a little maneuver that so suddenly upset all the old veteran's plans that Ben could scarcely realize its operation. Before he could recover himself, the front part of the wagon shot back, flinging him bodily through the air, the box slid down the incline to the bridge, and then with a crash went whirling into the eddying waters below.

"Tricked, by gum!" was jolted from Ben's capacious mouth as he landed with a thud on

the boards of the bridge. "Spermaceti! but he worked it well."

Catamaran Bill's little trick had indeed been a clever one. The wagon was one of that kind which upsets to unload by means of a pin at the front. Realizing his peril, with the odds against him, the wily scoundrel with his foot had worked the bolt loose holding the bottom in place until the catastrophe just rated had overtaken his enemy.

Had Catamaran Bill after making a spring forward in time to avert a backward somerset have fled precipitately, he could have eluded further conflict with his foe. As he saw a *dénouement* that he had not counted on, however, he became wildly excited and alarmed. The box had fallen into the river, and Catamaran Bill knowing or imagining he knew the value of its contents, had reason to be concerned.

For his load had come clear from San Francisco, and was no less than the box passed originally at the custom-house as the remains of a certain French alien in Hong Kong named Jacques Roguet.

The first move of the opium-smuggler was to put into execution a maneuver agreed upon generally between himself and his associates in times of peril. He had drawn a peculiar whistle from his pocket. In a moment a shrill, echoing signal rent the silence of the valley.

This delay had given Ambergis Ben time to recover himself. The desperado, believing his opponent stunned or killed by the fall, started on a keen run toward the shore across the bridge as the old whaleman's form came around the dismantled cart.

"Stand, or ye'r' a goner!"

Ben's stentorian mandate had no effect upon the fugitive except to increase his rate of speed. The issues of the moment were portentous to the excited mariner. He raised the revolver and fired.

Catamaran Bill uttered a cry of pain, stumbled and fell; fell so suddenly from sight, that Ben's eyes opened to their widest as he reached the spot where he had gone down. Before the whaleman's glance was revealed a deep pit, or well, or mining excavation, so dark beyond the surface that the honest old fellow fairly shuddered as he theorized that not only had he mortally wounded the desperado, but that the victim of his sure aim had saved his friends the necessity of employing an undertaker, by leaping into his own grave.

Ben's face became serious as he recalled his thinking faculties to the exigencies of the present moment. As he glanced down the river he saw the box which had slid from the wagon shooting down the vortex of rushing waters, and beyond, at a window in the old mill, the forms of several men just come into view.

"Catamaran Bill's settled," he muttered grimly, "but those fellows yonder probably heard his signal and my shot. I won't back out. I'll risk it, by gum, I will! Here goes."

Ben's round face became determined as he rearranged the cart, sprung to the seat, and whipped up the horse. His busy brain had formed a wild plan of penetrating to the den of smugglers. He believed his disguise would deceive Bryce Williard if he saw him, and he stooped the chance of being received at the old mill by some one else.

The wagon jogged along and reached the upland, crossing the narrow roadway toward the mill. Old Ben was trusting to luck to guide him as Catamaran Bill would have proceeded, and he felt that his boldness might carry him through.

A large gate rolled back as he reached the front of the old mill. It closed as quickly as old Ben drove into an immense apartment on the ground floor of the structure.

Half a dozen men surrounded him as he prepared to dismount. One of them, evidently a leader in a way, brushed the others aside, and, with every manifestation of excitement, reached old Ben.

"What was the row, Bill? You signaled—Why, it ain't Bill! Who are you, anyway?"

The critical moment had come. In the obscurity of the place, the men had not discerned that the driver was a stranger. Now, a menacing murmur went up, and their hands sought their weapons.

Ben was equal to the occasion. He had expected to be questioned, and he had prepared himself to answer boldly.

"Give a fellow a breathing-spell, will yer?" he jerked out half-angrily. "Whew! I've had a run of it! Some of you loafers bring me a drink. I'm nearly choking with the row I've had."

The leader followed Ben as he coolly sat down on a cask.

"See here, my man," he said, in a suspicious tone of voice, "who are you?"

Ben looked up with every affectation of amazement.

"Who am I?" he repeated with a derisive laugh. "Well, that's good! Who should I be but the driver that took Catamaran Bill's place. Mebbe some of you want to spare me the job next time. I don't want it."

"But the signal?"

"The signal! Wouldn't ye signal if you was jumped on by some 'tarnal revenue?'"

"The revenues, boys! We're spotted!" cried the man who had been questioning Ben. "Set the lookout! Get your guns ready, and tell the captain about it, quick!"

The men separated at the man's orders. As for the leader, he listened silently to Ben's garrulous talk.

It was the role the old sea-dog had adopted to help him through—talk. "The more I talk, the less they'll question," he theorized, and he went over the assault at the bridge just as it had happened, only that he transposed the circumstances in their recital.

"How did you come to drive the wagon, anyway?" demanded his companion.

"Bill gave it up to me. He knows me. I'm to be trusted, captain, an' no questions asked, don't fear, although I've had a hard experience in these quarters. Why! would you believe it, I got clean knocked out of a boat in these diggings last night, by a mean coyote of a fellow from the city."

Ambergris Ben had a motive in view in his candid admission of his encounter with Bryce Williard. Sooner or later here, his visit must lead to a meeting if Williard was in the place; sooner or later, too—and the sooner the better, Ben told himself, he would locate the missing Juanita.

He chuckled serenely as every vestige of suspicion seemed to fade from the man's face, and he turned to listen to one of the returning men. As they left the room, Ben sauntered coolly after them, and stood at a landing they finally reached surveying curiously a scene in progress in the room beyond.

Several men had just dragged from the stream the very box that had slid from the wagon over the bridge. A man was directing their operations, and bidding them convey it to the next apartment. Despite himself, Ambergris Ben thrilled wildly, for that man he instantly recognized as Bryce Williard.

"It's mortal heavy, captain," one of the men was saying.

"It's lucky if the stuff ain't spoiled," replied Williard, with a frown. "This way, boys, and send the driver to me. I don't understand why Bill did not make the run."

Ben dodged aside. He was not quite prepared to meet his foe face to face yet. He was aware that some new commotion was going on in the next apartment, for he heard the sound of prying open the box suddenly suspended, and a startled exclamation echo from Bryce Williard's lips.

Suddenly the door of the apartment, into which Williard had the box conveyed, was opened. Williard himself, excited and pale, turned to the men.

"Where's the man who drove the stuff here?" he demanded.

Ambergris Ben could evade him no longer. He moved forward with a rough obeisance.

"Hear I am, captain, at yer orders."

A sinister light shone in Williard's eyes. Ben fancied he heard him grate his teeth. At all events, he was certain that he detected an unmistakable menace in Williard's voice as he said, hoarsely:

"You come with me!"

"Suthin's happened. The game's blocked—but how?" Ben whispered to himself.

He grasped his revolver in his pocket, and swept the room into which Williard led him with a searching glance. On the floor, the cover unscrewed but unremoved, was the box taken from the river, and behind a door, partly closed and leading into some other apartment, a sound emanated, as if a listener was posted there.

Bryce Williard wheeled so suddenly that Ben involuntarily recoiled.

"I have a few questions to ask you," he said, hoarsely.

"Fire away," calmly replied Ben.

"You drove that box here?"

"I did," was the response.

"And you are also the man I knocked out of the boat, last night?"

Ben had counted on this. He feigned the

utmost surprise, and stared blankly at Williard.

"Waal, bless my eyes, ef you ain't the man that clubbed me! I owe you one for that."

He had thrown a half-threatening, half-jocular intonation into his voice, but Williard's somber face never relaxed.

"My man" he said slowly, his burning orbs never leaving Ben's face, "I believe you are lying."

"Me lyin'? Oh, come, captain, I did my mission!"

"You are no wandering nobody; you are a man I know well, and your name is—"

Williard paused impressively.

"Waal, captain, out with it, ef you know," interrupted Ben.

"Your name is Ambergris Ben."

Old Ben retreated a step or two. His dissembling manner gave place to his natural pose of face. His little, twinkling eyes grew determined as he tightened his grasp on his revolver.

"Who sez so?" he demanded.

"I do."

From the half-open door a form came suddenly into view, a figure covered with dirt and blood. Catamaran Bill, escaped in some mysterious manner from the pit, and on hand to unmask his pretended messenger at a critical moment, confronted the amazed Ben.

Ambergris Ben's hand shot out. He was on his mettle in a time of peril; but the revolver flashed into view too late. As both Williard and Catamaran Bill sprung forward, he was held a struggling prisoner in their grasp, while the former shouted for help.

Two of the smugglers burst into the room and seized the struggling Ben at a lock from Williard.

"Take him below—you know where," commanded Williard. "We'll shut his meddling mouth for good, this time."

"Let me at him! Oh! if I'd only fixed you when I had the chance," raved Ben, giving way to his rage.

Catamaran Bill turned to follow the men from the apartment. As he reached the door Williard spoke to him.

"See that they take that man to the water-room, and make no mistake in silencing him forever. You understand me, Bill?"

"Perfectly."

Bryce Williard turned as his ally left the apartment. Then every vestige of blood deserted his face as he staggered back, as if dealt a sudden blow.

For, sitting bolt upright in the box he had believed held smuggled opium, was a man holding a leveled revolver in each hand.

Upon Bryce Williard's amazed hearing fell the startling words:

"Countermand that order, or you are a dead man!"

And the speaker he recognized in a flash as his old-time enemy, Gold Dust Tom!

CHAPTER VIII.

DOOMED!

If Ambergris Ben had startled Catamaran Bill when he climbed into the wagon, the unexpected appearance of his deadliest foe, combined with the remarkable fact of his being in the opium box, fairly stupefied Bryce Williard.

With fallen jaws, the leader of the smuggling league viewed the calm but threatening face of Gold Dust Tom, and his craven heart thrilled with terror as an ominous click followed the scout's threat.

The *denouement* to Tom's proposition to Colonel Clowry to get into the box had been attained only through a series of the most unpleasant episodes. Tom had induced the chief of the revenue service to follow out his desires, and when Catamaran Bill appeared to claim the box, supposedly containing the corpse of the mythical Jacques Roguet, to all appearances the deception of the boldly conspiring league of criminals had not been discovered.

Several holes had been bored in the box as Tom had requested, the opium and wax face removed, and the crafty Catamaran Bill never suspected that he was carting into the very heart of the enemy's stronghold the worst foe the unscrupulous league he represented knew.

The reader may consider the attempted fraud on the revenue service a deft one, yet the cunning of this class a short time since was actually successful in filling an embalmed body with opium and smuggling it from China to San Francisco!

All went well with Gold Dust Tom except a slight suffocating feeling and numerous painful jolts along the rough road until the *rencontre* on the bridge. When the box slid off, up-

turned, and went crashing into the water, the adventurous Tom realized what had transpired, and became seriously alarmed. Fortunately, however, the water trickled slowly through the air-holes, and the box was dragged from the stream by the smugglers within a very few minutes after its descent. When the top was pried loose, through the interstices Tom could see what was going on in the apartment where he had been removed, and was a witness to the interview between Ambergris Ben and Bryce Williard, but he did not manifest his presence then.

It was only while Williard was giving his final orders to his accomplice, Bill, that the imprisoned Tom thrust the cover to one side and, when Williard turned, confronted him with a surprise that fairly startled him out of his senses.

Tom did not risk giving his adversary an advantage by lowering his weapons, but remained seated in the box. The flash of intelligence that came to Williard's mind as he saw the box otherwise empty, told the young scout that he comprehended all. In a tone that brooked no cavil, Tom repeated his command.

Bryce Williard trembled, but did not move. Then he essayed to speak, but his voice quavered.

"To countermand the order," he muttered, "how can I?"

"Open that door and shout as I direct you villain!" came angrily from Tom's lips. "Remember, if you stir one inch over the threshold, I fill your carcass with lead."

Bryce Williard sullenly moved toward the door. He well knew his adversary, and considered discretion the better part of valor in the present instance. His hand on the knob, he started.

Tom watching his every movement as a cat watches a mouse despaired a hopeful expression on his face. He could only imagine its cause from the direction of Williard's glance. The desperado had looked back of the man in the box, and then stood perfectly still.

Before Tom could turn, he learned the cause of Williard's emotion. One of the smugglers had appeared on the threshold of the room in which Catamaran Bill had been secreted. He had heard Tom's words and had discerned his leader's peril. With the agility of a cat, he had crept toward the unsuspecting Tom, and, with a rough, strong grasp, clutched the arms of the young adventurer, drawing his hands backward and rendering him helpless.

The room was filled with men while Tom vainly endeavored to free himself. Bryce Williard's evil face gleamed balefully as he hissed his triumph to the discomfited Tom.

"Cornered!" he said, tauntingly, "both you and your friend, Ambergris Ben. Do you know what we are going to do with you, my friend?"

"No, and don't care."

"We're going to clip your wings for good. Bill," to his ally, who had crowded into the room with the others, "we'll light out of this at once."

"Why?"

"Because it's getting too hot to hold us. This bold envoy of the revenue came directly from them, and they may be watching the old mill even now. Bind that man and leave us alone," ordered Williard to the smugglers who held Tom a prisoner.

His orders obeyed, Bryce Williard bestowed a tantalizing look on his captive and sat down, motioning Catamaran Bill to a seat.

"We are going to leave here," he continued, evidently intending that his words should reach Tom's hearing; "you and I, half a dozen of the best of the boys, and the girl, Juanita."

"And desert the old place for good?"

"No, let the lieutenant and the remainder stay and watch. If it looks suspicious, they can leave. We've lost the opium, but yonder fledgling shall pay for his work. Get the boat ready and we'll slip down the river and cross over to Marcy Canyon."

Gold Dust Tom started at the sound of that familiar name.

"And when I have married the girl and got her fortune," pursued Williard, slowly, "we'll retire from business."

Tom ground his teeth, but was silent. He realized with torturing chagrin that the game was completely in his enemy's hands.

"You see the fortune is no bagatelle," went on Williard with a malignant side-glance of satisfaction at his helpless foe. "The papers I got from that noisy old shark, Ambergris Ben, and the girl in my possession, settles the matter. There is a man named Caldeiras, an old, crazy fanatic who lives in Marcy Canyon, to find, and

Gold Dust Tom.

the matter's settled. You see us off safe, Bill, and come after us down the road on horseback to see if we're followed."

"All right, captain."

Bryce Williard arose and strode to where Tom lay.

"As to you," he hissed out between his set teeth, "I'll settle a long score of hate I owe you. You spoiled my game twice, and gave me a scar I will carry to my grave."

Bryce Williard exhibited a deep abrasion on his wrist with a vengeful look.

"I prevented you robbing a poor old miner. I'd do it again," remarked Tom.

"You'll do it no more. Hello, there!"

Williard shouted the words through the open door, and two of the smugglers again answered his call. He gave them some low-voiced orders and they cut the bonds securing Tom and forced him through the doorway.

Leading him down a dark, narrow passage, they finally halted at a room in the center of which a huge frame door stood open. Tom was watching his chance to attempt a conflict with his captors, but they held him with an iron grip, and finally forced him to the edge of the opening.

"Jump or fall, as you like," remarked one of the men with a coarse laugh as he gave Tom a forward push. "It's a cl'ar drop of twenty feet, and ye'r' likely to end yer misery ef yer break yer neck."

Tom had no choice as he fell precipitately through space. He landed abruptly against a hard stone floor badly shaken up, and in complete darkness except for the dim light entering the place from the opening above.

"Ye 'tarnal catamounts! give me one round in squar' fight an' I'll settle all of ye."

Tom started. The voice sounded near him, and he recognized the tones of the irrepressible Ambergris Ben, a prisoner like himself in the mysterious dark pit of the smugglers' haunt.

"Hear the bully crow!" laughed one of the men overhead.

Bang!

One of the men fell back with a yell of pain as an unexpected bullet from Ben's revolver pierced his arm.

"I've winged one of ye," cried Ben in wild delight. "Aha! ye'd bett'r."

The trap was slammed down violently, and the two captives were left in entire darkness.

"Ben!"

The old whaler moved nearer to the sound of Tom's voice.

"Waal, old boy, we're in for it," he remarked somewhat seriously.

"It looks so."

"Whatever this hole is, Tom, thar's no climbin' up, or diggin' down."

"What's their idea in putting us here?"

"We'll soon know. Hark!"

A slight, rasping sound broke on their hearing as Ben spoke. It was followed by a roaring, gurgling rush.

"Water!" ejaculated Tom. "I see their game. Ben, and I guess we're settled, this time."

"What do ye mean, lad?"

"They've opened some water-gate, and they intend to drown us. Stand firm, old boy. Can you swim?"

"Like a water-rat, an' cl'ar grit to the last, yer bet!"

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE TRAIL.

INKY blackness prevailed in the underground apartment into which Gold Dust Tom and his friend Ambergris Ben had been thrust by the smugglers, yet, in a very few moments, the keen-witted scout comprehended their situation fully.

"This place is surrounded by stone on all sides," he explained to his companion. "The water comes in from the river through an opened trap near the top."

"Let's reach it, and crawl through."

"You're wild, Ben. We couldn't scale that steep wall, and the aperture is not very large, judging from the way the water comes in. You see, it's beginning to fill in here."

"An' mean time, those critters air gettin' away with the gal!" ground out the old man.

"Courage, Ben!—we ain't done for yet."

Inch by inch, the water began to raise. It fell in a little stream, or trickled down the stone sides of the aperture, and then, increasing in volume soon covered the boot-tops of the two men standing grimly awaiting the worst.

They did not speak now. Both, experienced men of nerve, were thinking over their unpleasant predicament and formulating a plan of action when the final crisis arrived. Within

half an hour after their incarceration, their expertness as swimmers was called into requisition; ten minutes later, and they were floundering about in a dozen feet of water.

Ben puffed like a porpoise, and was compelled to clutch at the projections on the sides of the place to keep above water.

"If we can hold on an hour longer we are saved," spoke Tom confidently.

"What do you mean, lad?"

"The rising water will lift us to the level of the floor overhead."

"That'll shut out even breathing space," remarked Ben.

"Wait, and see."

The imperiled captives arose foot by foot until at last their hands touched the floor above them. Gold Dust Tom floating in the water and feeling around touched the under side of the trap-door. He pressed vigorously against it.

"I guess we're caged," remarked Ben ruefully.

"Not yet. This trap-door is bolted on the other side."

"Then thar's no use trying to force it—we bain't got tools nor purchase."

"Hand me your shooting-iron, Ben."

The next moment there was an explosion that shocked the two men.

"Ye'll rouse the smugglers," muttered Ben.

"Then we must fight for it. Aha! I thought that shot against the bolt rasp would fetch it."

As Tom spoke he pushed the trap-door back with a slam and climbed through the aperture to the floor above.

"Your hand, Ben, some one is coming."

Completely drenched and chilled, the two men stood within the apartment.

The report of the pistol seemed to have alarmed the denizens of the place, for the door suddenly opened and a man rushed upon the scene.

Gold Dust Tom had heard him coming and was prepared for him. The smuggler measured his length completely stunned on the floor, as Tom's fist welcomed his appearance.

"We won't dally here," spoke Tom quickly.

"This way, Ben!"

"Ye mean to leave the ranch?"

"Yes."

"But the gal?"

"Williard has undoubtedly gone by this time," replied Tom as he advanced to a window and looked out. "We must be on the trail, and at once. See, Ben—by leaping from here to the ledge of rocks below, we can reach the river."

"Go on; I'm with ye."

Tom descended from the window to the bed of the stream with slowness and caution, followed by the old whaler. The former seemed to understand, from what he had overheard Bryce Williard say, the direction the smugglers had probably taken.

They were forced to ford the river to evade swimming through a narrow gorge, and soon reached the upland. They could see the old mill in the distance, and they paused to consider their situation and future movements.

"What's yer intentions?" Ben asked finally.

"To follow Bryce Williard, of course. I happen to know that he is making for Marcy Canyon with the girl, Juanita, your money, the papers he stole from you, and half a dozen picked men."

"Is that far from hyar?"

"A matter of fifty miles."

"An' ye know the place, Tom?"

Gold Dust Tom smiled significantly.

"Know it?" he repeated. "I know every foot of the old valley as well as the streets of San Francisco. I lived there for years, and at last I begin to understand the game our enemies intend to play. More precious than the fortune these men hope to secure, however, is your charge—Juanita. She must be rescued, and the sooner we overtake Bryce Williard the better."

"Then let us hurry on. Yonder trail, along the ravine, is probably the way he has gone."

Tom was thoughtful for a moment.

"There's no certainty of that," he remarked. "They may have diverged to the timber yonder. Ben, you make a *detour* that way and come back to the ravine again, and I'll try and find some trace of their course along the edge of the gully here."

"All right, Tom; an' signal me ef ye fall into any danger."

Tom saw Ben disappear, and proceeded along the edge of the ravine, his eyes bent on the ground, seeking some trace of the party he believed had gone that way. So engrossed was he in his task that he did not look behind him un-

til the sound of a horse's hoofs echoed on his ear.

He turned quickly. Rounding a rock on horseback, and evidently intent on overtaking Bryce Williard and his party, was Catamaran Bill.

The surprise of both men was mutual. Tom, disarmed in the haunt of the smugglers, was at a disadvantage, but he now started for an open-hand conflict with his foe.

Catamaran Bill's horse shied aside, and Bill himself lifted his head suddenly. The man must have been an expert at the course of tactics he immediately adopted, for suddenly a lasso shot out from the saddle, encircling the form of Gold Dust Tom, and ere the latter could make a move to dodge aside, had pinned his arms helplessly to his side.

A boisterous, gleeful laugh rung from Catamaran Bill's lips.

"Ah!" he cried, triumphantly, "I thought the old trick would fetch you. Escaped, eh? Waal, ye'r' caught in time, it appears, and ye won't slip my clutches so easily again."

He gave the lasso an extra jerk, tightening its cutting folds as he spoke. Tom, abashed, bewildered at his sudden capture, was jerked clear off his feet as Bill's horse started up.

The smuggler seemed to enjoy his enemy's discomfiture with hilarious glee. He turned himself sideways on the saddle, allowing his horse to proceed at a leisurely gait, and tying the other end of the lariat around his waist, he sat regarding his helpless captive with diabolical satisfaction.

Tom had struggled to his feet and was compelled to walk the distance of the lasso's length after his captor. The little roadway leading along the edge of the ravine was beginning to darken with the oncoming shadows of evening, and Tom realized as he discerned that the lasso had caught him in a tight slip-knot around his body that he was indeed in a box.

"We'll soon overtake yer especial friend, Mr. Bryce Williard," sneered Bill. "Ye'll see ver gal, too; a last parting ef I can jedge from Williard's temper this afternoon. Ha!"

The last ejaculation was a token of mingled alarm and dismay. The horse had slipped suddenly and had gone down a rut in the road. So abrupt and unexpected was the movement that it resulted in a singular catastrophe for both the desperado and his prisoner.

The lasso sent Catamaran Bill from the saddle and gave Tom a jerk several feet ahead. The lasso was tied tightly around Catamaran Bill's waist, and as he fell it swung with his body. To his horror Gold Dust Tom saw the desperado fall to the ground, gain a sudden impetus from an incline leading toward the edge of the ravine, and the next moment the form of Catamaran Bill disappeared over the edge of the gully.

Gold Dust Tom attempted to brace himself to resist being drawn after the smuggler, but his effort was a vain one. He was pulled headlong to the ground, the lasso grew taut as a ship's line in play, and then, with a whirl, he was driven to the edge and over the rocky verge of the precipice.

The fall to the bottom of the gully would have killed both, but the apparent fate that threatened them was averted. Both had gone over the abyss—both were whirled with terrific velocity through space, but a singular episode had transpired.

At the spot where the descent had occurred, a large tree grew at the very edge of the gully. The long lasso had caught around this, and Catamaran Bill had fallen on one side, Gold Dust Tom on the other.

With a violent jerk, ten feet from the top, the two men came together suspended over the yawning gulf below by the frail lasso, their dangling bodies meeting with a shock in that critical moment of mutual peril.

CHAPTER X.

A LUCKY ESCAPE.

A WILDER episode could not well be conceived amid the wild scenery of that mountain gully. The peril now staring him in the face seemed momentarily to stun Catamaran Bill. His adversary hung silent and helpless, while his own body swayed unsteadily. Then he grasped the lasso and glared around him.

He had nothing to fear from his foe, for that foe was securely bound. His only thought seemed of self-preservation, and as he discerned a means of certain escape, he ground out a satisfied ejaculation and drew a knife from his belt.

With one hand the desperado grasped the rope over Tom's head. The equipoise, owing to his

superior weight, was on his side, and he lowered his helpless enemy, and lifted himself several feet at a single movement.

"Look down," he hissed out vengefully. "ef ye kin. Ye've given us lots of trouble, but I'll settle ye with a hundred-feet drap this time."

He placed the edge of the keen-bladed knife across the lasso. His intention was a diabolical one, for he meant to cut the lariat below his grasp, and send Tom whirling to the rocky bottom of the canyon below, and then ascending hand over hand, painter fashion, to *terra firma*.

"Drap that!"

A stentorian voice sounded the dire command, thrilling the renegade's heart to sudden terror as he recognized the tones. The knife fell back and he glanced up.

An excited face looked down from the edge of the precipice overhead. A murmur of the deepest amazement and alarm parted Catamaran Bill's lips.

"Ambergris Ben!" he muttered, hoarsely. "Curse the fates! I am beaten—lost!"

It was indeed the old whaleman, and his little twinkling eyes announced a terrible determination while his strong hands reached the rope. With one jerk he lifted Gold Dust Tom out of peril, lowering the desperado several feet as he dragged the rope across the tree.

The craven nature of Catamaran Bill asserted itself. He uttered a frantic yell of terror as he began to descend.

"Would you murder me?" he cried.

"No, my friend; jest keep cool till I help the friend ye hed at yer mercy a minute sence, an' I'll attend ter yer case," replied Ben, coolly.

Dangling in mid-air, Catamaran Bill, looking up, saw Ben lift his friend to the ground, release him and double the rope around the tree. Ben seemed to pay no further attention to him, but after releasing Tom, began volubly to detail his good fortune in reaching the place in time to save his partner's life.

Darkness grew over the lonely scene while the two friends were talking and deciding how best they could use their prisoner to further their plans. As Ben advanced to the edge of the ravine again, Tom heard him utter a dismayed ejaculation.

He hastened to Ben's side with a hurried query.

"What's up?"

"Look fer yerself."

Ambergris Ben, with a blank face lifted the limp lasso as he spoke. As the dangling end came into view, both understood what had occurred.

"He has escaped!" ejaculated Tom.

Escaped or dropped to the bottom; it's one an' the same, he's gone," replied Ben, sententiously. "He's a cute one, this same Catamaran Bill is, an' we're losin' valuable time in discussin' the critter."

Catamaran Bill had certainly again escaped his enemies. Either he had cut the lasso and climbed by overhanging shrubbery to some other part of the upland, or had lifted himself by the rope to *terra firma*, and escaped while the two friends were unsuspiciously conversing.

The horse Bill had rode was browsing some distance away. Ben started toward the animal to secure it, when a distinct, peculiar whistle echoed through the valley.

At the same moment the horse pricked up his ears, listened, and started on a keen gallop away from the scene.

"Thet settles it," remarked Ben as the horse disappeared.

"Settles what?" demanded Tom.

"Thet our friend Catamaran Bill hez escaped. He'll hurry after Williard, an' our chances of stealing in on 'em will be mighty unsartain."

Tom thoughtfully considered Ben's words, and was silently reflective for some time.

"I reckon you're about right," he remarked finally. "We won't try to trail the men, Ben."

"What then?"

"Cut around to Marcy Canyon, and be ready for them when they arrive."

"I'm agreeable."

The tramp they took up was a cautious one at first, for having decided that Catamaran Bill would be likely to set a watch for them, the two friends now sought to evade a useless and unequal contest with their adversaries. They again crossed the stream, struck off in a different direction, and the next evening at dusk entered a canyon surrounded by the grandest and wildest scenery the State afforded.

"An' this is Marcy Canyon?" queried Ben, as the fading beauty of the place became dimmed by the growing twilight.

"This is Marcy Canyon, Ben," replied Tom,

"and I never come to this grand old spot without feeling a thrill of enthusiasm. It's wild as nature produces, but dangerous, Ben, for the red-skins contend for the possession of the valley with the white men."

"What is Williard's business hyar, then?"

"That you shall soon know. We're here in advance of him, and need rest. Look yonder."

Gold Dust Tom pointed down the canyon. Old Ben strained his eyes surprisedly as he saw a few rods distant and apparently suspended by some mysterious means between heaven and earth, the outline of a rude hut.

"Ambergris and spermaceti! what's that?" he ejaculated in open-mouthed wonder.

Tom smiled placidly.

"A house in the air, Ben, and its mys'rious perch on nothing will soon be explained to you. Go careful, old boy; a few steps further and we reach a cave leading to my mountain home."

"Ha! the warnin's needed badly."

Ben had suddenly drawn back. Gold Dust Tom, too, came to a dead halt, and drew back among some heavy brush.

Both peered forth, watching intently some moving objects a few rods distant.

Old Ben drew his only weapon, a revolver, and glanced searching forward awaiting Gold Dust Tom's orders, his low-breathed aspiration announcing the possible peril that threatened them, as he whispered ominously—

"Injuns!"

CHAPTER XI.

IN MARCY CANYON.

THE spot of espionage of the two friends was a peculiar one, and even in the deepening dusk allowed an interesting view of Marcy Canyon.

On either side, extending apparently for miles, the great mountain sides shut in a scene of rare, rugged beauty. A little rushing rivulet dashed down a rocky roadway, while the remaining area of the canyon was clothed in rich verdure.

At the point where Tom and Ben stood, however, nature had made a curious formation. Two almost perpendicular rocks of enormous size arose to the height of nearly one hundred feet. At the base they were half an acre in extent, gradually narrowing to the top, and seemed at the summit to be broken off abruptly. They were of a peculiar, chalky formation and stood like grim sentinels guarding the valley beyond.

At the top, where the two rocks diverged about twenty feet, a singular spectacle was afforded. This was what had fixed and startled Ambergris Ben's attention, now distracted by the lurking savages. As if built between the two rocks, and held in place by them, a log cabin was held firmly between the two pillars of stone in a half-slanting position. It could never have been built originally in that way, and its singular location was what had amazed Ben.

The mystery of this apparently inaccessible house in mid-air was soon to be explained by Tom, who, as the gliding forms of the savages disappeared from sight, beckoned silence to Ben and led the way directly toward one of these high pillars of rock. Its base was covered with an undergrowth of shrubs and vines, and as Tom led Ben into a perfect tangle of bushes, he pulled aside what seemed to be a portion of the earth itself, but what was in reality a moss-covered boulder, and uttered the single word:

"Follow!"

He had himself crawled through an aperture into a dark underground passage, and, Ben following him, he replaced the stone. Taking his companion's hand, Tom led the way as if familiar with the place, over stones and logs upward and sideways until the old man's laborious breathing well-nigh gave out. He paused at last, drew aside the branches of a stunted willow, and both stood in the fresh air.

A half-repressed exclamation of the utmost surprise parted Ben's lips as he looked down and around him. They stood on the very summit of one of the lime-stone rocks, the valley reposing a hundred feet down. He viewed his companion with questioning surprise, but the latter advanced a step or two and pushed open a door, showing the interior of the house set between the two rocks, and said, smilingly:

"Come in, this is my home."

Ben's curiosity was too great to admit of his accepting the offered hospitality without question. When Tom had gone to a shuttered window and examined it to see that no stray gleam of light would penetrate to the outer air and had lit a lamp and seated himself, Ben followed his example, but with a slap on his knee ejaculated forcibly:

"This bangs Banagher!"

Gold Dust Tom's face wore a gratified expression at Ben's homely compliment to his rude home.

"It is certainly a curiosity," he remarked, quietly. "Yes, Ben, this is the home I knew for years, hunting, fishing and scouting in yonder valley. I have not visited it for a long time, and I only do so now temporarily."

"Ye guy it up, then?"

"I had to."

"Ye had to? Scared away, Tom?"

"I don't scare, Ben; but on my last scout against the thieving red-skins I won their bitterest enmity. They found out my home and haunted it. My life was not safe, and I could do no good staying here."

"But they couldn't reach ye?"

"No, the secret of the means of access to this place is as great as the mystery of how it came here."

"How did it?"

Old Ben's eyes were like saucers as he asked the question.

"Simply enough," replied Tom. "Ten years ago this big rock was neither perpendicular nor divided. It was a hill, and on its apex an old hermit built his rude home commanding a view of all the valley. Time wore on. Piece by piece the rock wore away, and split down as you see into two pieces. The two sides holding the cabin in place seemed firm. Anyway, I discovered it, and accidentally found out that the inside of one of the rocks was hollow. I designed a way to reach it, and lived here in solitude and safety, as you know."

"But the danger—"

"Ay, Ben, some day one of the rocks may crumble and there will be a crash, but probably not during our short stay."

"Ye leave in the mornin'?"

"Yes, on Williard's trail. These Indians will probably pass on, and unless they are my old enemies will prove friendly enough. Now, then, Ben, something to eat and a sleep, and then a tramp in search of Williard and his party and the secret mission they are engaged on in this place."

"Ye know what it is?"

"I can imagine. A mile distant from here lives a man who for twenty years has existed in a solitude mysterious and silent as death itself. He is a Mexican, and his name is Caldeiras."

"Ha!" remarked Ben, with a start, "it pears to me I once heard Juanita's father mention that name."

"Very likely. From what I have gleaned from Williard's lips, that man has something to do with the fortune supposed to be referred to by the papers Williard stole from you."

"Did you ever see him?"

"Caldeiras? Yes; but never to speak to him. He is a gloomy recluse, a fanatic of some extinct Aztec race, who has a cave-like home in the valley, respected alike by whites and red-skins."

"Why don't ye seek him out?"

"No, it is better to trail Williard and learn all the truth, for I could not probably gⁱⁿ access to Caldeiras's home. Come! Ben, to rest, and with the morning a final effort to rescue the woman I love, and defeat the evil designs of Bryce Williard, gambler, smuggler and thief."

Gold Dust Tom flung himself on a rude frame couch as he spoke, and old Ben followed his example. The latter could not enjoy the ready repose that came to his tired companion, however, for the newness and strangeness of the place interested and attracted him. His eye wandered curiously over the interior of the old hut, and, thinking over all the marvelous story Tom had told, old Ben arose to a sitting posture.

"I can't sleep!" he muttered restlessly. "The idea of being mountain high in a little hut, perched above human habitation! It beats the Dutch, I declar' it do! I'll take a look outside. It's wu'th the trouble, an' the opportunity may not come ag'in."

Ol' Ben's seafaring experience had possessed no parallel to guide him and warn him that under certain circumstances caution was necessary in opening a window with lurking foes outside. The whaleman unfastened the tight-bound blind and flung it open, and then drinking in deep invigorating draughts of the balmy, evening air, stood gazing entranced at the sleeping valley below.

"What a pictur!" he ejaculated ardently. "I don't wonder Tom likes the gal; he's used to beauty fer next to her pretty face Marcy Canyon equals anything I ever saw on land or sea—"

Bang! thud!

With a start old Ben dodged aside. A report

had come from below, a bullet sent with unerring aim had penetrated the window-sill.

"Spermaceti! am I gettin' ter be an ijiot?" gasped Ben as he dodged to where the lamp was, and hastily extinguished it. "What did I do that piece of foolin' fer, leavin' the light burnin', showin' myself at the winder, and as much as invitin' the red-skins to pepper me?"

A perfect fusilade beat against the open shutter as Ben started to reach it.

"It's no use!" groaned the old man. "Tom'll cuss me for my pesky folly. Tom! Tom! I say, Tom!"

His host sprung from the bed at his call.

"What's the row? the window open! Shots! Ben, what have you done?"

In a deprecatory tone the whaleman recited his act of folly.

"You've sounded the alarm, sure enough," muttered Tom, "but it can't be helped now. Let them fire, they can't hurt us. The old cabin has stood many a leaden hail."

An arrow darted through the open aperture as Tom managed to close the shutter. The incident seemed to trouble him for he murmured audibly:

"My old enemies and new ones mixed. They can't reach us, and if they surround the rocks and stay there, we'll have to steal away some way."

The firing subsided, and all was quiet for some time. Tom did not relight the lamp nor seek rest again, but sat thinking anxiously over this new complication which might engage Bryce Williard in unexpected trouble, and necessarily imperil Juanita should the smugglers' party come in contact with the Indians.

Ben started quickly forward as after a series of dull thuds as of some objects striking the floor beneath, he fancied he detected a slight smell of smoke.

"They're at it, lad. It's fire!"

"It seems so."

"It is so. They're shootin' their pesky fire-arrers inter the floor. I kin see a little spot of fire below an' smell the smoke."

Gold Dust Tom started anxiously to his feet.

"The wood won't burn probably," he said.

"An' ef it does?"

"We are still safe inside the rock."

"I've got ye in a nice box, haven't I?"

"Don't worry, Ben; you didn't mean it. The floor is burning."

They could hear the logs crackle, and Tom realized that the cabin might be doomed. Both he and Ben stood undecided in the center of the room.

"Shall we leave the old ranch?" inquired the former.

"Not yet. Ha! we'll have to move quickly. Ben, to the door!"

Gold Dust Tom had spoken none too soon. A tearing, crackling sound mingled with the swaying of the floor. One end of its support had evidently burnt through, and just as Ben reached the door the floor began to move downward.

Too late to follow his companion, Tom sprung to the side of the cabin.

His action saved him from certain death, for the next second, as he clung to the log-side of the dismantled hut, the entire floor, weakened by the fire, dropped through space and went crashing, a lurid mass of cinders, to the valley sheer one hundred feet below.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HOUSE IN THE AIR.

SINCE leaving San Francisco, the undaunted Tom and his quaint old friend had met with a series of startling adventures. This last one in the house in mid-air, however, had capped the climax, and Gold Dust Tom felt all his powers of endurance and deftness called into requisition as he clung to the side of the ruined hut.

The burning floor of the cabin falling through mid-air, scattered the score of dusky forms haunting the landscape below only momentarily, for as Tom began to ascend rapidly as possible, climbing around the wall to the door, he was greeted with a volley of random shots.

"Phew! that was a close shave," ejaculated the excited Ben as his friend finally gained his side on the rock.

Here, safe from the shots of their enemies, they were enabled to obtain a complete view of the valley below. The savages were yelling with discomfiture and rage as they realized the deft escape of their foes. The floor had carried the fire with it, and the ruined cabin was now dark and desolate.

While the two friends were discussing their situation, a sudden stampede was made by their massed foes. Its cause puzzled Tom for some

time, but finally as the sounds of a new fusilade some distance away greeted his hearing, he directed Ben to follow him.

"What's up, now?" inquired the latter.

"The savages have engaged in some new conflict."

"P'raps with another hostile band?"

"It's not likely," replied Tom. "They are remnants of tribes generally leagued together. I have an idea that Williard's party have been met by them."

Ben uttered an alarmed ejaculation.

"An' the gal in peril? By gum! Tom, we're badly needed ef 'tis so."

They descended as they had gained the eminence, and cautiously crept from the rock. None of their foes were in sight, but constant reports half a mile down the valley told that a conflict was in progress.

Gold Dust Tom dashed down the ravine. He was unarmed, and Ben's sole armament consisted of an empty revolver. Anxiety for Juanita impelled both to rash procedure, however, and they did not relax a running gait until at a slight turn in the valley they confronted a picture of savage warfare.

The scout's worst fears were confirmed. A party on horseback was plainly outlined among crouching savages, and that party was under the leadership of the man Tom counted his worst foe, Bryce Williard.

Step by step, the smugglers were contending with the red-skins. As Tom seized a rifle lying by the side of a dead warrior, he shouted to Ben:

"Arm yourself, and try and reach the girl."

"Every man for himself!" cried the whaleman, and the men were lost amid the confusion of the melee.

Tom had sought to make a *detour*, and get to the spot where Juanita if she was with the smuggler's party would be placed for safety, but a dozen difficulties confronted him. Twice he had a hand-to-hand conflict with a savage, and twice he was slightly wounded by a bullet from the other party. The fight grew hot and furious, he saw the smugglers turn to fly, and recognized with a wildly beating heart, a woman's form in their midst. Then, as the savages seemed to reach the smugglers, the figure was torn from her defenders, and a blur of vision mingled with a woman's shriek of alarm as Gold Dust Tom felt a heavy blow on his head, and he sunk insensible to the earth.

He had eyes alone for the imperiled Juanita in the conflict, else he would have perceived the crafty savage who brought his uplifted rifle down over his defenseless head.

For an hour life was a blank to the brave young scout, and when he returned to consciousness, he could with difficulty estimate his surroundings.

He finally made them out, however. He had been borne a short distance down the valley, and a savage sat on the ground at his feet apparently guarding him.

The sounds of battle had ceased. The savage, as if awaiting the arrival of his fellows, sat with his back to his prisoner. Gold Dust Tom arose cautiously to a sitting posture, crouched for a spring, and then with sudden agility landed on the Indian's shoulders.

His sinewy hands met around the throat of the dusky warrior, and forced him to the ground, not in time, however, to prevent a muffled yell escaping the Indian's lips. As the savage fell back insensible, and Gold Dust Tom saw several forms approaching the spot, he sprang to his feet and darted away in the darkness with the fleetness of a deer, pursued by a dozen random shots.

He had climbed a little ledge of rocks and was proceeding along them when he drew back suddenly.

The valley seemed haunted with strange appearances that eventful night. Several men, whom he recognized as the smugglers, were patrolling the spot.

Gold Dust Tom, as he drew back, was surprised to find that the rock he shrunk behind led to a sort of defile. He pursued it for a few steps, came to an opening in the solid hillside, and then paused.

At a turn in the defile a singular sight had been revealed to him. Before him was a spectacle most remarkable in that out-of-the-way locality.

He could see a large cave-like apartment, richly furnished with skins and ornaments on the wall. In a large rustic chair sat an aged man with white, flowing beard and sunken, but piercing eyes.

But it was upon the other occupant of that apartment that Gold Dust Tom's interest was

centered. The latter stood in an attitude of half-obeyance before the strange old man, and was unmistakably Bryce Williard.

"I come directly from San Francisco, as I have told you," Williard was saying, "and if you are Caldeiras, you are the man Arnold Leslie directed me to find."

Gold Dust Tom started, and peered more searchingly into the apartment.

The old man spoke slowly, impressively:

"If you are indeed a messenger from the man you name, you have the proof that you speak the truth."

Bryce Williard's hand went into his pocket. He brought to light a package of papers—the precious documents stolen from Ambergris Ben!

"The proofs are here," he said, sententiously.

Gold Dust Tom prepared for some interesting disclosures.

"At last," he murmured, "I shall know the secret surrounding the woman I love—Juanita Leslie."

CHAPTER XIII.

A DASTARDLY CRIME.

BRYCE WILLIARD had handed the package of papers to the old man he had designated as Caldeiras, and as Gold Dust Tom gazed fixedly at the hermit and his long, flowing robes, he recognized the mysterious denizen of the valley, with whom he had never spoken, but whose strange isolation he had often heard discussed.

The eyes of the hermit were like two coals of fire as he carefully, almost eagerly, scanned the paper which he unfolded. His bosom heaved, and he seemed deeply affected over the memories they evidently evoked.

"The same!" he declared, as he glanced over them; "they are the papers given to Arnold Leslie fifteen years ago. Do you understand what these documents contain?" he demanded, fixing his eyes on Bryce Williard.

Whatever the game of the latter, however much changed from its original design by the evident abduction or death of Juanita Leslie among the savages, Williard maintained a bold front. He shook his hand negatively, and in an indifferent tone of voice replied simply:

"How should I?"

"Then how came they in your possession?"

"How? Ah! I should have told you. You know that Arnold Leslie is dead."

A sorrowful expression crossed the hermit's face.

"Dead!" he repeated—"the husband of Zelda, the last of the Montezumas, dead!—and she, too, gone these many years! But the child—the last descendant of the royal line with Aztec blood in her veins, little Juanita?"

"Is safe in San Francisco. Of course, I could not bring her amid these dangers to see you."

"It is unnecessary," the old man hastened to reply to Williard's bold lie. "My duty to her must overlook an affectionate desire to see her. You were sent hither by her?"

"No, by her father. When he died, he intrusted those papers to my care, and told me to come to you when Juanita was eighteen years of age."

The old man was plunged in a deep fit of abstraction for some time. Finally he aroused himself.

"Look!" cried Caldeiras, with sudden energy as his hand swept the rich hangings and quaint furnishing of the place. "For a quarter of a century I have been here in voluntary exile from Mexico, surrounded only by the sacred emblems of the Aztec faith, and yonder warden of the mysterious secrets of my race, Alquerque."

As he spoke the name Williard started violently. From a shadowed alcove in the rock two piercing eyes gleamed, and a hoary eagle, immense in size, croaked gloomily, and flapped its wings, as if in answer to its name.

"I was," continued the old man, "the warden of a vast fortune rescued from pillage among our race, and handed down through the years in the hope that some day a valid descendant of the Montezumas might appear to claim it, and, with mighty valor, employ it to regain the lost empire of our fading people."

Gold Dust Tom thrilled at the mystifying realism the old man employed in his speech. Even Williard was somewhat impressed, but he listened silently.

"I had hoped," continued Caldeiras in a dreamy, broken tone, "that the old kings might arise from their graves at a mighty trumpet-blast and proclaim the glory and faith of the race they led to victory in the years agone. It was but a dream. They have passed away until only one lineal descendant of the old king-

ly line lives, and she is far removed by intermarriage with the Americans. I mean Juanita Leslie, the daughter of the peerless Zelda."

"And she is the heiress?"

"Of all this hidden wealth, yes," interrupted Caldeiras, with solemn dignity. "I told Zelda when the child was born, that when it grew to be eighteen years of age a demand for the sacredly-guarded wealth would be honored. You come to me as her father's messenger, your proofs are furnished me. The wealth shall be hers."

The gloomy tones of Caldeiras contrasted strangely with the gleaming avarice in Williard's eyes.

"Then my task ends in disappointment, for the wealth will not revive the old glory of our race, alas! a vanished dream for me. Then I die and pass away, and the grave shuts in the last hope of Aztec empire."

Caldeiras arose and proceeded to a quaint old cabinet and unlocked it. Evidently Bryce Williard expected that he would reveal the coveted wealth at once. Instead, the old man drew forth writing materials, seated himself at the table again, and was busily engaged for some moments in inditing a missive of some kind.

He looked up at last, and tendered the scroll to Williard.

"This letter, taken to Roderiguez, a banker of San Francisco, and presented by the girl, Juanita herself, will entitle her to the fortune."

Bryce Williard's face fell visibly.

"Then that fortune—"

"Is not here. Think you I would tempt the cupidity of any strolling vagabond by keeping the wealth in this unguarded place?"

Williard perused the scroll curiously, almost disappointedly.

"Read it," commanded Caldeiras, "read it aloud."

Williard obeyed him and Gold Dust Tom listened intently.

"To Juanita Leslie and to her alone, presenting certain documents in the possession of her guardian, Roderiguez will deliver over the fortune left him by Caldeiras fifteen years since," read Williard.

"But there is a line below I cannot make out," he added.

A deep, expressive look crossed Caldeiras's face, but he said quietly:

"It is only a line in the Aztec that Roderiguez will understand."

Bryce Williard arose. His face was clouded with disappointment at not receiving the coveted fortune at once; but the watchful scout read in his crafty eyes an ability to cope with this contingency.

Tom had no idea of allowing Williard to leave the place with the precious order, however. He realized that with it and the other papers in his possession even if Juanita was not available, Williard would readily secure some girl to represent her. The scout acted on a quick impulse, and sprung suddenly forward.

Bryce Williard fell back with an ejaculation of amazement. Caldeiras turned and viewed Tom with suspicious alarm.

"Ha! an eavesdropper and intruder," he cried.

"No," returned Tom quickly. "A friend to Juanita. This man is an impostor."

"An impostor!" repeated Caldeiras, excitedly. "Then he is not Arnold Leslie's messenger?"

"He is not; he stole those papers from Juanita Leslie's real guardian."

Caldeiras sprang forward to wrest the papers from Bryce Williard's hands. The latter drew a knife quickly. To Tom's horror, ere he could prevent it, the knife sunk deep into the old hermit's breast, and Caldeiras bathed in blood sunk with a moan of anguish to the rocky floor of the cave.

"Monster!" he gasped out. "You have killed me, but it will not avail you. The line in Aztec will prevent imposture."

Williard did not heed the last dying utterance of the hermit, for Gold Dust Tom with a cry of mingled indignation and rage sprung toward him. The young scout's hands met around Williard's throat, and, unarmed, as he was, Tom held the struggling craven at his mercy.

"Fiend! assassin!" he cried, "you have murdered that defenseless old man, you have robbed me of my bride. I will kill you!"

He would have choked the life from the miscreant's body in his rising anger, but that an unforeseen contingency defeated his rageful purpose.

The eagle witnessed the assault on its master, and amid the confusing conflict, with vengeful

instincts of fidelity, with a wild scream fluttered down over the heads of the swaying combatants. Its talons met in Gold Dust Tom's hair, its wings blinded his eyes, its beak tore at his hands.

He was forced to relinquish his grasp on Williard's throat. As the latter staggered back he uttered a cry for help. When at last Gold Dust Tom fought off the eagle's vicious assault, the cave was filled with Williard's waiting associates from the outside.

"Tie and gag that infernal meddler with a dozen ropes," he yelled forth, pointing at Tom. "We have succeeded, boys, but we'll settle him. Pile this stuff around the middle of the cave and set fire to it. Fling Gold Dust Tom into the pile, and block up the cave with rocks. We'll settle him, and remove all evidence of yonder old dotard's death at the same time."

Gold Dust Tom, pale but resolute, was silent as he found himself bound and gagged securely. The men stripped the costly antique hangings from the cave, piled them together as ordered and set fire to them, flinging the body of the bold scout upon them and applying a match.

A lurid flame lit up the place as the smugglers retreated. The dense smoke permeated the cave, and then with a groan of dismay and defeat Gold Dust Tom felt life and sense deserting him amid the terrible peril of the moment.

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPTURED BY SAVAGES.

"Tom! Tom! where are ye?"

Ambergris Ben's frantic tones echoed through the cave in which Gold Dust Tom lay insensible on the burning heap ten minutes after the dastardly act of Bryce Williard and his associates. How the old whaleman had managed to reach the spot at that opportune moment, the reader will soon know.

Ben, blinded with the lurid flames, and half choked by the dense smoke filling the place, could not for a moment distinguish the form he sought among the blurred outlines of the cave.

He finally, however, made out the true status of the case. He saw the bleeding, rigid figure of the old hermit with the dead eagle by his side, and discerned the bound form of his friend.

The old veteran staggered under his load and the difficulties of the situation as he seized Gold Dust Tom bodily in his arms. He sunk exhausted to the ground as he reached the outer air, but reviving finally under its influence, hastened to the brook and securing some water in his hat returned and dashed it in the face of his unconscious friend.

Gold Dust Tom soon revived and, released of his bonds, shuddered as Ben excitedly related how narrow had been his escape from death.

"The old hermit Caldeiras?" cried Tom, suddenly.

"He's dead, I could see that," replied Ben.

Tom uttered an ejaculation of sorrow and rage.

"That inhuman fiend, Williard!" he cried, wildly. "He shall suffer for his crime. But how came you here?—how did you learn I was in that cave?"

"Simply enough," replied Ben. "When we left each other in the tussle with the red-skins, I followed a party of 'em as hed carried off the gal."

"Then she lives?"

"Ay, partner, but in bad hands. I couldn't help her, and I wandered around kind o' loose, keepin' 'em in sight an' lookin' fer ye, when I ran across a little covey of men outside hyar."

"The smugglers."

"Prezackly. I hadn't laid low long when thar was a rumpus. They ran into the cave at a yell from Williard an' out ag'in, an' from their talk I jadged that ye were in danger—"

"And you rescued me at the risk of your own life."

"I did my duty, old partner, an' glad of the chance."

"And Williard and his party?"

"Tuk the horses and scooted down the valley fer San Francisco."

"Carrying the precious order for the fortune with them!" cried Tom. "Come, Ben, there is no time to lose. The trail must be followed and that man defeated."

"Ater the gal Tom, yes."

Gold Dust Tom started.

"True," he replied. "She has fallen in bad hands. The Indians—they are still in the valley, Ben?"

"I reckon not."

"Then they will carry Juanita with them. Once on the way to their camps, and she will be lost to us or consigned to some cruel fate."

Tom arose agitatedly to his feet and with a sorrowful look at the cave where Caldeiras had met his death, started from the spot.

"Ben," he said suddenly. "We have our choice of two alternatives."

"What are they, partner?"

"The girl or the fortune."

"An' ye hesitate atween 'em?"

"No. Rather let the fortune fall into Bryce Williard's hands a hundred times than Juanita be threatened with peril and death."

"Then tackle the red-skins, Tom."

"Yes, alone. You must not accompany me. I will tell you all that is necessary to know to defeat Bryce Williard's evil plans."

"For what purpose?"

"To prevent his succeeding in his scheme to secure the wealth belonging to your charge. You and I must part."

Ben stared ruefully.

"Ye don't mean it, Tom?"

"I do. We will hasten to the first settlement beyond here. There I will secure a horse and arms, and you will return to San Francisco at once."

Ben demurred to his companion's programme, but Tom was decided, and he informed Ben what he must do in hastening to Roderiguez, the banker in the golden city.

It was daylight when, without meeting any trace of the party of savages, they reached a little settlement beyond the canyon. Here, at the tavern of the place, Tom secured a horse and arms, and seeing Ben moun'ed and ready to start, gave his final instructions.

"Good-by, old boy," said Ambergris Ben soberly as their hands met in parting. "I don't like ter leave ye alone to foller the gal."

"Never fear, Ben, she shall be rescued. You see that Bryce Williard is found, apprehended for Caldeiras's murder, and his plans defeated, and I will either save the woman I love or die in the attempt!"

With a last wave of his hand Gold Dust Tom started his horse down the valley, and Ben with a rueful sigh turned toward the distant city.

At noon our hero found the trail of the savages. They had several hours' start of him and were proceeding south; an hour later he was closely pursuing them, and he knew he would soon reach their camping-place for the night.

He had stopped to water his horse and take a survey of the situation beyond a little wooded stretch of valley, when he drew the steed into the thicket and peered searchingly down the stream. A canoe was coming with the current and it contained a dusky form.

A glance at the approaching figure told Tom that the man was one of the party he was trailing. He tied his horse securely, advanced to the river-bank, and, sheltered by the overhanging willows, awaited the arrival of the canoe.

CHAPTER XV.

SAVED.

THE canoe containing the solitary savage came nearer and nearer, and Gold Dust Tom sheltered by the copse could make out the attitude of the boatman to be one of listless inattention to his surroundings. Evidently, the Indian had been sent for the canoe, and was doubtlessly conveying it to the camp of his fellows.

Tom soon decided on his course. Amid the crooked and numerous windings of the stream he might lose sight of the man, and he had no knowledge of the probable extent of his journey. The Indian was looking ahead and idly keeping the boat in the mid-stream current with his paddle. He did not, therefore, notice an almost noiseless maneuver on the part of Tom as the latter entered the water.

The moment the boat had passed him Tom dived down under the water. He was an expert in that line, and he seized the end of the boat gently, and kept his head well out of view.

The unsuspecting savage allowed the boat to proceed probably a quarter of a mile, when he turned it suddenly ashore. In the darkness, he did not notice Tom, and the latter saw him secure the boat, leap ashore, and give utterance to a signal whistle.

A minute later four savages came from the woods beyond the shore, and a long confab ensued. Tom, familiar with their dialect, made out that they comprised a section of the attacking party in the canyon, and that they were to proceed down the river with their captive, while the main party on horseback made a foray further east.

Our hero managed to glide ashore, and secrete himself among some bushes. He saw the four

men point to the interior, and the boatman left them. The others prep red at once to disrobe.

"They are going to take a bath," murmured Tom. "Good! I'll soon make my presence felt here."

The savages laid arms and clothing aside, and were soon sporting like school-boys in the river. It was an opportune moment for Tom. He cautiously crept toward the pile of discarded apparel, seizing the entire outfit, and dashing it to the woods without being discovered by the bathers.

He paused long enough to secrete the stuff and select a rifle and brace of revolvers. Then, as a gleam of light from the timber enshrouded his attention, he started toward it. A wild joy pervaded his being as he neared the place. He had not expected to find the main body of warriors gone, but to his surprise and delight he found, piling wood on a camp-fire, the single savage he had followed in the boat.

The man was guarding the cause of all Tom's emotion and anxiety. Secured by a light lasso to a tree, and seated in an attitude of tearful despair, was the fair captive of the savages.

"Juanita!" murmured Tom. "At last I have found her, at last her release has come."

He did not wait to exercise caution. With a rush he reached the spot, with one vigorous sweep of the club-end of his rifle he laid the savage prostrate and stunned on the ground."

"Juanita!"

He uttered the fond name tremblingly, startling the maid as he approached her. Her low, delighted words greeted his ear as he cut the bonds securing her, and her tear-filled eyes beamed with joy as she sprang to her feet.

"Hark!"

She uttered the word with a sudden shiver of fear, as, amid the rapture of their reunion, a series of yells sounded on the silent night air.

"The Indians from the stream—they have discovered my trick; they are coming this way," cried Tom. "Ah! they have dashed into view."

Sure enough, from the belt of timber a quartette of half-naked savages were coming toward the spot.

Tom spoke a few forcible words into the agitated Juanita's ear.

"Obey me implicitly," he uttered rapidly. "Glide toward the river north, and follow it closely."

"And you?"

"I will join you shortly. You will find a horse tied half a mile distant. If I do not come, mount the animal and hasten away."

With a tremulous sigh, Juanita obeyed him, and Tom turned to meet and rout his oncoming enemies.

The savages' shots told that they had discovered and recognized him as a foe. Our hero lifted his rifle. The trigger came down, but there was no report.

"Unloaded!" he uttered, in a tone of deep chagrin. "Foolish that I was, not to examine it first. The revolvers both empty!" and as he gazed down the barrels and discovered the fact, he flung the useless weapons away.

The savages discerned his predicament, and dashed toward him. The foremost of the quartette, bolder than the others, reached Tom's side, and with a yell announced his readiness for a hand-to-hand conflict.

Tom was prepared for the onslaught. He dodged down as the swinging sledge-hammer fists of the red-skin grazed his face. With a dexterous move, he lifted the astonished Indian bodily from his feet, and sent him hurtling through the fire directly in the faces of his companions.

Then following up his advantage, he jumped to the vicinity of the fire, and seizing a long, flaming stick darted it toward the savages.

As the burning wood came in contact with their bodies, the Indians retreated with yells of pain and discomfiture. Tom gave the fire a kick that sent the blinding cinders in all directions, and then dashed off toward the river.

Juanita had apparently followed his instructions implicitly for he did not come up with her. He was growing anxious, when, as he reached the spot where he had left the horse, he saw the animal plunging wildly forward a few feet distant.

Juanita sat in the saddle, but a glance told Tom that her unpracticed hand was worrying the horse into a fever of terror and flight. As the steed was dashing wildly from the scene, our hero made a running jump.

"Juanita! safe at last, and now a wild ride for love and liberty!"

He breathed the words fervently in her ear, as he gained the saddle behind her and seized the reins from her trembling hands.

On and on through the night, her fair head pillowed against his manly breast, Gold Dust Tom urged the mettled steed. The woman he loved had been rescued. Now to reach San Francisco in time to outwit the evil scheme of their mutual enemy—Bryce Williard!

CHAPTER XVI. BRYCE WILLIARD'S PLOTS.

FOORTY-EIGHT hours after the timely rescue of Juanita Leslie from the hands of the savages by Gold Dust Tom, a scene of rare interest and excitement—to at least one character of our story, was transpiring in a little restaurant in the city of San Francisco.

That day had witnessed a series of events bearing vitally upon the issues involved in the game for the Caldeiras fortune.

At daybreak a band of dusty travel-worn men had reached the confines of the golden city from the south and separated. They were the party of smugglers, and their leader, Bryce Williard, as he left them bade Catamaran Bill accompany the others to a well-known haunt, and report to him that afternoon at a certain retired restaurant on points he mentioned as they separated.

Later on in the day, the faithful emissary of Gold Dust Tom, Ambergris Ben, entered the city from the same direction, proceeding to a hotel where he perfected an elaborate disguise, and before an hour had passed was on the trail of the man he had determined to hunt to his doom—Bryce Williard.

And later still in the day, there entered the city from the self-same direction Gold Dust Tom and Juanita Leslie, in time to baffle the evil scheme of the man who held the order for the Caldeiras fortune from the dead hermit of Marcy Canyon.

In the restaurant to which reference has been made, a man sat in a little compartment toward the close of the afternoon, impatiently thumping on the table before him and watching from the half-parted curtain every person who entered the place.

It was no other than Bryce Williard, and his face grew gratified and his tones were relieved as he said to a man who finally entered the place and hastened to the little compartment:

"At last, Bill! What news?"

Catamaran Bill sat down and drew a folded paper from his pocket which he handed to his companion.

"From the boys, eh?" muttered Williard. "They expect us to join them in going from Starlight Rock to meet a ship with a consignment on? Well, let them think we are still with them, but we won't go, Bill."

"Ye won't?"

"Not if we manage to get the banker Roderiguez to disgorge. The woman, Blanche did you get her?"

"I did."

"And she will do?"

"She is here."

"Where?"

"In the outer room."

"And can be trusted?"

"I'll bring her in and you can see for yourself."

"Do so."

Catamaran Bill left the compartment. There was a suspicious sound behind the board partition of the place, but Bryce Williard was oblivious to all save the issues of the present moment. He looked up quickly as Catamaran Bill entered leading a woman radiantly beautiful, but with dark, scheming eyes, who met Williard's glance boldly.

Williard eyed her critically for some moments. Then he said:

"You understand what you are to do?"

"To represent a certain Juanita Leslie."

"Ah! Bill has posted you!"

"On every point."

"And I can rely on your fidelity and secrecy?"

"For money, yes."

"It shall be yours—a cool thousand dollars if you succeed. There is no need of delay. I have sent a letter to the banker, Roderiguez, telling him I will call at five o'clock. Come, Bill, will you order a carriage?"

Catamaran Bill bowed assent, and left the compartment. In a few moments Bryce Williard and the woman followed.

They had not got clear of the door of the restaurant before a form glided after them from the compartment adjoining the one in which the mysterious conversation had transpired.

The apparent spy on their trail was well disguised, but Ambergris Ben's honest tones were unmistakable as he muttered:

"They're putting their scheme into play, eh? Wal, I can call the police at any time. As it is I'll foller them. R driguez, the banker!—good enough, and, Mr. Bryce Williard, I'll be on hand to nip yer little game at the proper moment."

The schemers had entered a carriage that proceeded some distance and finally paused in a second class street in the lower portion of the city. The building before which they alighted was a gloomy edifice of stone, and was well known at that time to the denizens of the city as the home of a private banker of great repute named Roderiguez.

Bryce Williard, the woman on his arm, bade Catamaran Bill remain in the vicinity, dismissed the carriage, and entered the house boldly. At the open portals a servant stopped him, but as Williard mentioned his name the man bowed politely and said:

"This way, sir; my master is expecting you."

A minute later Williard and his companion were ushered into an apartment fitted up with desks and a safe. Its sole occupant was a dark, shrewd-looking Spaniard, who viewed his visitors searchingly, and beckoned them to a seat.

"I have received a note signed Bryce Williard to-day," the banker said, abruptly. "It informed me that you would call on important business. Will you explain?"

For reply, Williard drew from his pocket the note Caldeiras had indited.

The banker started, and perused the missive eagerly. Then he looked up.

"And this is the lady, Juanita Leslie?" he inquired, with a glance at Williard's female companion.

"Yes, the heiress—"

"To the wealth I have held in trust so long. You desire it sent to you?"

"No, I will take it."

A half-suspicious light was visible in the banker's eyes at Williard's eagerness, but he said as he advanced toward the safe in one corner of the apartment:

"As you like. It is a royal fortune, and all I require are the papers—"

"Ah! the documents are here," interrupted Williard, producing the papers stolen from Ambergris Ben.

"And the remaining evidence that this is indeed Juanita Leslie?" concluded the banker.

Bryce Williard started.

"The remaining evidence?" he stammered, vaguely.

"Exactly. Caldeiras has attached a postscript in Aztec to his letter, bidding me to be sure on that point."

"I do not understand you."

"The mark, the brand."

"The mark—the brand!" quavered Williard.

"Is not his order sufficient?"

"No; this lady, if the real Juanita, still bears on her wrist an indelible brand, a mysterious symbol of the Montezumas, imprinted there by Caldeiras's request in her infancy."

"Curses! we are foiled!"

Amid his terrible dismay, Bryce Williard hissed out the words, and sprung to his feet as his companion uttered a cry of chagrin.

"Ha!" cried Roderiguez, suspiciously. "An impostor! The mark is not there. Then she is not Juanita Leslie!"

"She is!" cried Williard. "The fortune, old man, it belongs to her. The papers are proofs; you think to defraud us."

He had advanced threateningly toward the banker.

"Ha! you threaten!" cried the latter. "Back, villain! would you rob me?"

"Aye of Juanita Leslie's rightful fortune. Give it up, I say!"

"Stand back, Mr. Bryce Williard, or you're a dead man!"

The words came unexpectedly. Williard turned, to utter a frantic cry of rage and discomfiture.

For, filling the doorway, a leveled revolver in his hand and vengeance in his eye, was Ambergris Ben!

CHAPTER XVII. OUTWITTED.

AMBERGRIS BEN was recognized by the discomfited Bryce Williard as the latter showed in his paling face when he heard the old whaleman's stentorian voice.

The banker, Roderiguez, recoiled and stared in wonder at this new appearance on the scene, while Williard's accomplice, the woman, started toward the door.

"The game's ended, it seems," she remarked with a wicked laugh. "I won't burn my fin-

ers with it any longer. Will you allow me to pass, sir?"

Ben hesitated, and then stepped aside.

"Ye," he replied, "ye kin go; my business is with yonder sneakin' coyote."

The woman passed through the door, and Williard began to edge his way toward the open window.

"Mr. Bryce Williard, alias Horace Ellis, the gambler, yer goose is cooked!" came impressively from Ben's lips. "It'll be the jail fer ye to-night."

"Who is this man—an impostor?" demanded Rodriguez, his eyes resting on Williard.

"Prezackly, Mr. Bunker! I am the real guardian of Juanita Leslie, an' he stole the papers from me he presented to you."

"But the order from Caldeiras?"

"He obtained by fraud and deception and then murdered the poor old man he had deluded!"

"Murdered him?" echoed Rodriguez, in a tone of anguish and horror, "my old friend, Caldeiras, *dead*?"

"It is false!" asseverated Williard. "This man is some blackmailer who hopes to benefit by a cunningly devised lie."

"I warn ye to keep quiet," remarked Ben, a menacing glitter in his eye; "ye're workin' yer way to thet winder, Mr. Bryce Williard, but I advise ye not to try ter light out or ye're a gone coon."

Williard stood stock-still as Ben's revolver clicked ominously.

"Now, then, Mr. Bunker," spoke the latter, "jest see that a policeman is called till I give this coyote inter custody."

"On what charge?" demanded Williard.

"Murder! The killing of Caldeiras the hermit!"

A spasm of alarm and fear crossed Williard's bloodless face.

"There are no witnesses!" he cried.

"Oh! ye confess it, then?" interrupted Ben. "We'll settle the matter when Gold Dust Tom appears. Ha! ye varmint, what new trick is this?"

"Foiled!" cried Bryce Williard suddenly, as he sprung to the window.

An episode quite favorable to his plans had occurred. Evidently his female accomplice, in departing from the house, had informed the lurking Catamaran Bill of the peril of his ally, for the door had suddenly opened and the leveled revolver was knocked from Ben's hand.

"Light out, Williard!" cried Bill, as he grappled with Ben. "I'm afraid we're spotted on the outside, too."

With a glance of chagrin and hate at the banker, Bryce disappeared through the open window.

The banker uttered a cry of alarm, and then stood gazing aghast as Ben and Bill went down with a crash, tightly clinched, on the floor.

In the fall, Ambergris Ben had struck a chair, splintering it to pieces. Half-stunned, he lay at the mercy of his enemy, who arose to his feet and drew a murderous-looking knife.

"You'll stand still and give no alarm, ef ye'r wise!" growled Bill, as he waved the knife threateningly in the face of the terrified banker. "I'm goin' to kill this man, an' I'm goin' to kill you too, ef ye don't deliver over the fortune as belongs to Juanita Leslie."

"Never, assassin—thief! Help! help! help!"

He uttered the cry wildly, for Catamaran Bill had sprung toward him with uplifted knife.

"I'll settle ye, or hev the fortune!" he cried, desperately; "an' I'll settle the only man who 'pears to know how Caldeiras died!"

"There is another, and he is here!"

Catamaran Bill wheeled like a tiger at bay. He dropped his knife and drew a revolver.

A long, desperate experience had hardened him to surprises, and while he was staring at the new appearance on the scene, he acted in accordance with the villainous instincts of his nature.

"Ha! Gold Dust Tom, and not dead, eh? Take that!"

He had fired point-blank at Gold Dust Tom, for it was the young scout's figure that filled the doorway. The shot was returned; and as Bill, seeing the game lost, sprung to the window, he staggered back against the sash, his arm shattered by a bullet from Tom's weapon.

"Stop, and surrender, or I will fire again!"

Bill heeded not the command. Wounded as he was, he lifted himself over the sash. Gold Dust Tom heard him utter a cry of pain as he fell headlong from view.

Catamaran Bill had met his fate in that last reckless attempt at escape. He was precipi-

tated sheer twenty feet below into a stone-paved area, whence a few minutes later he was removed, his skull crushed—dead!

In a few words Gold Dust Tom explained his identity and the meaning of the exciting scene that had just occurred to the banker.

He had arrived with Juanita, and, a minute later, he led the young girl into the apartment.

He had no difficulty in convincing Rodriguez of the validity of her claim. The mysterious brand was found upon her wrist, and the banker was ready to deliver the Caldeiras fortune at any time she desired it.

"Not yet," spoke Tom solemnly. "There is more work yet to do. I ask you to shelter my poor Juanita, worn out by travel and excitement until I return."

"You are going away again?" inquired Juanita anxiously.

"Yes, to avenge the murder of Caldeiras—to find the man who has caused all our trouble and has escaped—Bryce Williard."

"An' I kin direct ye to him."

To Tom's delight Ambergris Ben arose to his feet.

The scout grasped the whaleman's hand in glad welcome.

"Not hurt!" he cried.

"Not seriously, Tom."

"And you know where Williard has gone?"

"I kin surmise. When trailin' him I heard him tell about a meetin' with the Smuggler's League at a certain point."

"Where?"

"Starlight Rock."

"I know the place well. Some opium-smuggling venture."

"I reckon so."

"But he may have abandoned his purpose?"

"Not likely, seein' as his game here is spoiled. Justice demands his capture, Tom, and Caldeiras's murder must be avenged."

An hour later Gold Dust Tom, with an affectionate adieu to Juanita, whom he consigned to the care of the banker, started forth with Ben to track to cover their deadly enemy Bryce Williard the leader of the Opium Smugglers of the Coast.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTER THE SMUGGLERS.

Down the coast from the city several miles at an hour closely approaching midnight, a scene of considerable mystery and excitement was transpiring the same night Gold Dust Tom and Ambergris Ben had started forth on their mission.

The beach was rock-lined, and, in a little inlet sheltered by an overhanging cliff, a party of men huddled close to the rocks stood silent and grim, while ten feet distant a coterie of three seemed scanning the ocean and the vicinity with searching glance.

"Tbar's no sign yit of the varmints, it seems," remarked one of the trio, in a low, guarded tone of voice.

"We don't know that, Ben," replied Gold Dust Tom. "The colonel here has had longer experience with these coast bandits than we, and he believes these lights mean something. Ha! there they are again."

About half a mile down the coast the three leaders of the revenue party which Tom had impressed into his service saw a series of lights flash forth suddenly in the darkness, and then some distance out at sea, a reply seemed to be made to these signals.

"We must put off the boats," said Colonel Clowry, after a pause of reflection. "I think I understand this affair."

"You do, colonel?" inquired Ben.

"Yes. Some vessel that has stolen down the coast is making a night journey to San Francisco."

"Waal, what of it?"

"They have some opium on board, and they intend dropping it at sea into the hands of their enissaries ashore. Look there!"

In the dim light a boat could be discerned leaving the shore.

Colonel Clowry at once hastened to his men, and their shadowy forms were soon stealing down the beach. A moment later, and almost noiselessly, they launched a long boat.

Ben and Tom were hastening after them, when the latter paused.

"Go on, Ben," he said. "I will join you in a minute."

"What hev yer discovered, lad?"

"Never mind. Go ahead."

The cause of Tom's halt was what he imagined to be the visible outline of a form skulking in and out among the rocks. At the same

moment a dull whistle sounded from its vicinity.

Ben reached the boat just as it was pushed off.

"Jump in," ordered Colonel Clowry.

"Wait a minute, colonel. My partner will be along soon."

But as the moments went by no Tom appeared.

"We must not delay. He may be engaged on some new trail. Push off, lads."

Despite Ben's anxiety, the boat left the shore. His interest now centered on the operations of their enemies, however, the old whaleman consoled himself with the thought that Tom was able to care for himself.

The boat cut the water like a knife. The colonel informed Ben of his theories and intentions.

"The boat that just left the shore belongs to the smugglers," he exclaimed to Ben.

"An' ye intend to follow it?"

"No, to keep it in view. Out where that vessel stands, a package will be thrown to these men. That we must intercept, provided they do not see us and take the alarm."

Half an hour's row brought them fairly within sight of a brig sailing very slowly in a due-northerly course. At that moment the man on watch in the bow sung out:

"They've spotted us, colonel."

"Who, the brig?"

"No, the small boat, and they've changed their course."

The colonel surveyed the situation.

"It looks so, sure enough. Very well, lads, row fast and reach the brig."

Whatever Colonel Clowry's plan, he did not pay further attention to the small boat. Within hailing distance of the brig, he made out several forms on the stern.

As he ordered the men to slow the oars, he caught a hail from the ship.

"Hello, there! All ready?"

In a deep, gruff tone, Colonel Clowry sung out:

"All ready!"

The next moment a large, dark object was dropped over the stern of the brig.

"A rubber balloon," whispered the colonel, to Ben.

"What's it fer, anyway?"

"It contains the opium, and will float, you see. Row toward it, lads."

Almost within reaching distance, a sudden cry came from the brig.

Distinctly on the hearing of Ben rung out the words:

"I see the uniform buttons of the men! We've been tricked! they're revenues!"

"Sink the balloon!"

A flash and a shot came from the brig.

A bullet struck the rubber air balloon, and it collapsed just as Ben seized it.

The brig put about as if anxious to evade being overhauled.

Colonel Clowry ordered his men to return to the shore.

"We've captured the prize," he remarked as he dragged the collapsed balloon containing the opium into the boat.

"But missed the smugglers," replied old Ben ruefully.

"Perhaps not. Gold Dust Tom will be on the watch."

"That's so; but that's no sign of him."

Sure enough, when they reached the beach they could discern no trace of either Tom or the smugglers.

Ben was anxious about his friend. He paced the beach seeking some sign of him, and only paused when he came across a knife lying on the rocks.

Evidences of a struggle were visible around.

Ben turned to Colonel Clowry.

"Colonel," he said ominously, "my friend's got in trouble with those 'tarnal smugglers, I fear, an I can't rest till I find him."

"I'm with you in that, friend Ben," replied the revenue officer. "Gold Dust Tom has done too much for the Government for us to desert him in an hour of danger."

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

AMBERGRIS BEN was somewhat anxious when he failed to discover any trace of Gold Dust Tom. Had he known the situation of his friend at that moment, he would have been doubly distressed, for the young scout was in a most unpleasant and dangerous position.

When Tom had seen the skulking form on the beach, and had told Ambergris Ben to report to the revenue boat, he had glided among the

rocks and immediately started in pursuit of a figure a few moments later recognized by him as the person he sought, Bryce Williard.

The latter, either arriving late at the place of meeting, or left on shore to signal danger, had evidently seen the revenue party, for he accelerated his pace, and the positions of the two men rapidly changed to pursued and pursuer.

Once reaching the beach, Williard started on a keen run, and Tom, finding that he was recognized, kept in close pursuit. Finally Williard disappeared around a ledge of rocks, finding time, ere Tom appeared, to flash a lantern lying in a little nook toward the ocean. This had caused the smugglers' boat to put back to land. His mission effected, the desperado turned at bay and backed against a boulder on the inlet, as Tom dashed into view.

The latter had the drop on his foe, and his leveled revolver caused Williard to stand motionless and pale, awaiting his first words.

"At last, Bryce Williard!" spoke the scout, in deep, ominous tones, "we are alone, man to man, and you are my prisoner!"

"Since when have you constituted yourself an officer of the law?" sneered Williard.

"Since the murder of Caldeiras, the hermit," was the stern, accusing reply. "Throw down your weapons, or—"

"You'll murder me? Is that it? Come, you boast of your prowess and chivalry. You can never convict me with the crime you charge. It is a personal issue between us two."

The hot blood of indignation and rage mounted to Tom's bronzed cheeks.

"So be it!" he cried; "between us two the issue lies, as you say. For your dastardly treachery toward the woman I love, I demand the apology of blood; for the murder of Caldeiras, vengeance!"

"And you will fight me, man to man, knife to knife?"

"Yes."

"Then lower your revolver."

"No; first fling yours into the surf, and I will follow suit."

Whatever the wily schemer's plan, he saw fit to obey.

"One of us will never need the shooters again," he remarked, grimly, as Gold Dust Tom hurled his weapon in the water, and both drew their knives.

The night was not starless, and the knives gleamed as they were raised. It was light enough to fight; light enough to kill a craven, cowardly wretch, Gold Dust Tom decided, and he circled around his enemy, whose policy seemed to consist in evading his assault, rather than inviting and attempting to cope with it.

Twice the flashing blades clashed. Twice, by a clever feint, Williard evaded a hand-to-hand conflict. He parried and retreated until Tom grew suspicious and impatient.

"I'm giving you every chance," he remarked between his set teeth, "and you have some crafty plan in putting on the time. To the scratch, Bryce Williard, or I will force the fighting."

He sprung forward once more. Williard suddenly wheeled. Gold Dust Tom anticipating his flight, dashed forward to intercept the craven. At that moment a dozen men rounded the rock. The smugglers had returned, and for their return the cunning scoundrel, Williard, had been waiting. In a moment the scout was surrounded and a prisoner.

He cast a glance of withering contempt on the triumphant Williard.

"You sneakin' coyote!" he uttered forcibly. "You are too cowardly to live, too treacherous to deserve the friendship of a living being."

"I've got you, close enough," came the chuckling reply. "I'll carry my point yet, and Juanita shall be my bride—her fortune, mine!"

Tom was silent, and as the smugglers after a brief confab started for the inland, he allowed them to force him along their way.

They halted at last. It was at a point where two somber-looking structures faced each other across a little stream. They seemed to be the familiar haunt of the smugglers, for Tom was led into one of the structures, his hands bound, and he was thrust into a darkened room.

An hour went by, during which he could hear in various parts of the structure sounds of great commotion, which was explained as, in the corridor without the room in which he was confined a prisoner, he heard Bryce Williard's voice.

He was addressing one of the smugglers, and he asked:

"The stuff is all ready to take up-stream and dispose of?"

"Yes, captain," was the response.

"Then we will soon desert this old ranch dispose of our booty and blow the buildings up."

"Why not stay?"

"No," interrupted Williard, "the revenues are upon our trail. This infernal Gold Dust Tom has ruined our plans. We must disband."

"And your prisoner?"

"Wait for half an hour. Then leave yonder building at a signal from the window across the stream: I will end all traces of our past career, and settle our enemy, Tom, at the same time."

"All right."

A minute later Bryce Williard bearing a lamp in his hand entered the room.

He glanced malignantly at his bound captive.

"I have come here to offer you your liberty," he said bluntly. "I want no trifling, and I give you ten minutes to agree to write a letter to Juanita Leslie, insisting on her delivering her fortune to me to save your life."

Gold Dust Tom laughed derisively.

"You are modest in your demands."

"Just think it over," repeated Williard coolly. "Either that or death. I'm in earnest."

"So am I."

Williard left the room. He was gone some time. When he returned he was pale and excited, and as he hastened to the window his eyes gleamed with alarm.

"The revenues are here," Gold Dust Tom heard him mutter. "The boys are to leave the place. Ha! the signal! They are leaving, and the revenues will enter the building. They are doomed! Now, Gold Dust Tom, your answer to my demands."

"You have had it already."

Williard sprung to a corner of the room. His hand touched a knob in the wall.

"An electric wire connects with a concussion-fuse in the building across the river," he said. "A powerful explosion will blow your friends to atoms."

He touched the button—an explosion that shook the place sounded upon the still night air.

Gold Dust Tom uttered a groan of horror. He had not believed Bryce Williard's murderous threat. As he witnessed its consummation, he gathered himself for an assault, bound as he was.

His hands were tied behind him, but springing from the floor he flung his body forward. His foot struck Bryce Williard in the chest just as the latter was getting ready to end his life with a revolver-shot.

The desperado sunk back, stunned and bleeding. There was a wild commotion in the corridor without; the door was suddenly burst open. Ambergris Ben, followed by half a dozen revenue officers burst into the apartment.

"The explosion!" gasped Tom; "you were not hurt?"

"No," replied Ben. "We traced you hyar, an' drivin' the smugglers inter the building yonder, we started ter investigate this place when the one over the river blew up. Ha! ye coyote, stand still thar!"

Williard, recovering from his insensibility, had sprung to his feet. As he realized that he had doomed all his confederates by a terrible mistake, he jumped wildly toward the window.

A dozen shots from the revolvers of the revenue men pierced his body. He fell to the ground outside, dead.

"That ends the smugglers," remarked Ben, grimly, as he peered down at the prostrate form of the desperado.

"And avenges the death of Caldeiras, the hermit," added Gold Dust Tom, solemnly.

A few hours later, in the early dawn, Juanita Leslie welcomed her lover to her arms again, and before nightfall they were wedded, and the fortune turned over to the rightful heiress.

Ambergris Ben recovered his stolen money, for it was found secreted on the dead smuggler.

Bryce Williard's untimely death, and that of his confederates, filled the public interest for many days, and Gold Dust Tom was a hero, in people's estimation, for his part in routing out this formidable confederation of criminals. In his last courageous fight against the league he had effected a great public benefit, for he had effectively broken up one of the greatest pests the Golden City ever knew: the Opium Smugglers of the Coast.

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